SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

OCT.

15¢

# STAR WESTERN

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

BIGGER AND B ORIES OF THE WEST!

OLMSTED
COX
GIPSON
SAVAGE

GUN-COURAGE!
A STRONG NOVEL OF WESTERN FIGHTING MEN
by WALT COBURN

THE BULLWHIP REVOLUTION
ANOTHER GREAT BULLWHIP BILL NOVEL
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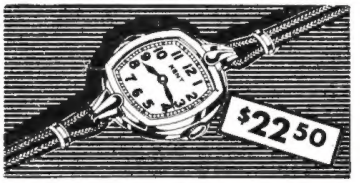


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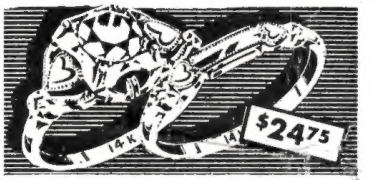


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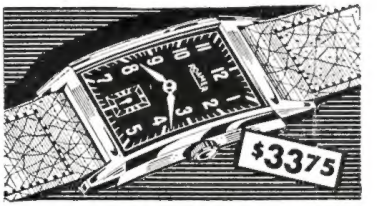


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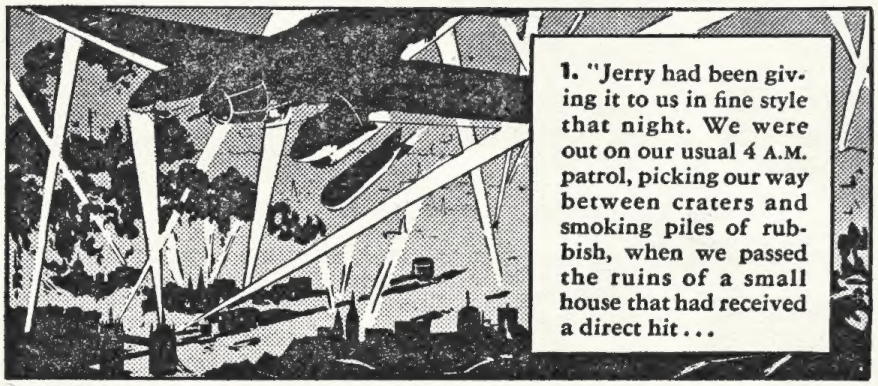
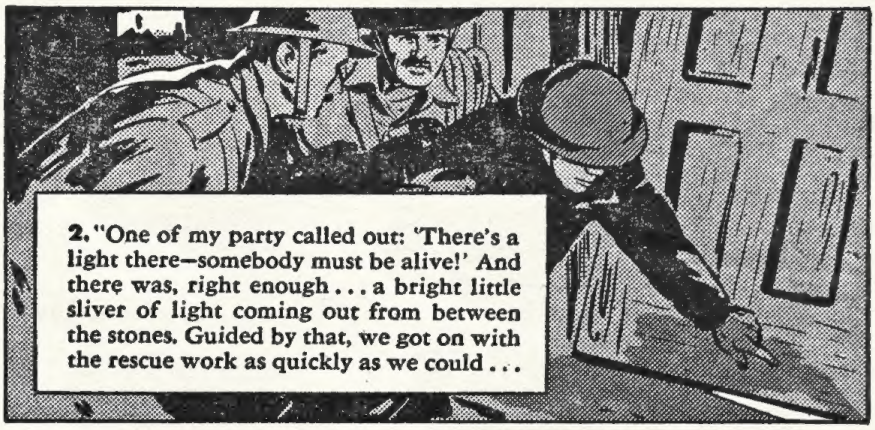


**1.** "Jerry had been giving it to us in fine style that night. We were out on our usual 4 A.M. patrol, picking our way between craters and smoking piles of rubbish, when we passed the ruins of a small house that had received a direct hit . . .



**2.** "One of my party called out: 'There's a light there—somebody must be alive!' And there was, right enough . . . a bright little sliver of light coming out from between the stones. Guided by that, we got on with the rescue work as quickly as we could . . .

**3.** ". . . and found our man, half dead from injuries and bomb shock, his hand still gripping his flashlight like a vise. Seems he'd grabbed his flashlight to show others to the basement when the bomb fell. And that—plus having fresh batteries—was what saved his own life!"

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# STAR WESTERN

## BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-ONE OCTOBER, 1943 NUMBER ONE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **Six Complete Short Novels** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**GUN-COURAGE!**.....*WALT COBURN* **10**

Cowfolks called Tug Guthrie's sheriff dad a fool to give that old ex-renegade another chance. . . . So when Tug heard the distant thunder of train-robber's dynamite blasting his brother's express car—and recalled some of the fumbling lies he'd caught old Van telling—he declared, then and there, an open season on all reformed outlaws!

**HOSS GREER'S PISTOL PROTEGE**.....*HARRY F. OLMSTED* **28**

The Twin Buttes combine saw their chance to make a bonanza clean-up by branding an owlhoot orphan with the crimson killer's sign. . . . But Hoss Greer figured he could blot that outcast brand with hot lead!

**LONG HAIR, LONG RIFLE—AND SUDDEN DEATH**...*WM. R. COX* **44**

When a loot-hungry savage band marked the Oregon-bound caravan for blood and booty, young Tom Peake's risky job was to play covered-wagon spy—and damn himself among all honest emigrants!

**LAST OF THE FIGHTING McCAULEYS**.....*FRED GIPSON* **62**

So long as a single bushwhacking Creech ranged the banks of the Colorado, no McCauley was safe—whether he sat in the governor's chair Austin, or peaceably stilled his good corn likker in the depths of the Texas cedar brakes.

**THE BULLWHIP REVOLUTION**.....*TOM ROAN* **76**

Not even Bullwhip Bill, it seemed, could escape the fate that had broken a hundred fighting men, when he was taken captive to that mysterious castle below the Rio—where the blacksnake master of all Sonora had prepared his deadly trap.

**THE BUCKSKIN ARMY HEADS SOUTH!**.....*LES SAVAGE, JR.* **98**

With a blood-price on his head, Painter Cole, free trapper, raced a buckskin army of treacherous half-breeds, Yankee murderers, and gold-starved mozos to a hidden golconda—that would bring quick death to its discoverer!

★ ★ **Two Star Features** ★ ★

**THE BRANDING CORRAL**.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* **6**

Where every one of the Star Western spread may put in his two-bits worth of augurment about the West.

**UP THE TRAIL**.....*A DEPARTMENT* **127**

The place for everyone to have his say about the Old West.

**NOVEMBER ISSUE** **OUT OCTOBER 8th!**

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# The Branding Corral

## Conducted by Strawboss

★ **Come in and join the hands as they start man-sized augurments about the Frontier.** ★

THERE'S an old song that says something to the effect that "Old soldiers never die," and we think that goes double for old cowpunchers. Their spurs and honors have been won in campaigns against searing drought and famine, against the ruthlessness of lashing Northers when men froze to their saddles after blinding, gruelling work of tailing up half-frozen dogies, of spreading winter hay on top of the snow, of keeping water-holes open. And sometimes, too, those same veterans played their part in the flaring violence of cattle-country conflicts which, though infinitesimal when compared to the world struggle today, match for bitterness and deadly purpose any military action in history.

Of those sharp and sanguinary outbreaks, perhaps none in the saga of our Western frontier so captures the imagination than the so-called Johnson County War. It marked an important milestone in cow-country history. It occurred recently enough so that there are men still living, hale and hearty, who took part in it and who still feel strongly about it. Yet, even after half a century, its real story may not be told; the issues are still too clouded with remembered bitterness to give a clear, unprejudiced picture of that tragic struggle.

Today, it is well to remember that the sons and grandsons of those who bore with bloodstained pride the name of "rustler" are fighting shoulder to shoulder with those whose forebears were nervously termed "invaders" and "hired killers."

It has always been the privilege and purpose of this department to open its pages to both sides of every question or argument dealing with Western frontier life. So long as the fight's kept clean, cowfolks, have at it—and may the best man win!

Here's a forthright and outspoken letter from W. S. Jackson, of Lubbock, who doesn't pull any punches about those troubled, parlous times along the Powder River:

*(Continued on page 8)*

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*(Continued from page 6)*

Dear Strawboss:

In a recent issue, I read a somewhat garbled account of the murder of Nate Champion and Nick Ray. Us old-timers knew them—and still remember that as one of the most dastardly, cold-blood murders ever committed in all the cow-country. I wasn't very well acquainted with Ray, but all the cow-punchers and small ranchmen of the Powder River country knew Nate Champion, and a truer friend or more honorable man never forked a saddle. We who knew him, knew that he never stole a cow for himself, and that he was blacklisted by the big cow-companies because he would not steal for them.

The company that I represented ranged on the Little Missouri, but I attended the Powder River General Round-Up for many years during the latter Eighties and early Nineties, and was acquainted with almost everyone connected with this so-called "Johnson County War."

Of course there was some stealing going on, as there always was and always will be in any stock country. But the men that these cattle-barons had on their list for slaughter were what cowpunchers called nesters—men with families who had no cattle, and who wouldn't have been able to distinguish between a milk cow, a burro or a wheelbarrow.

I was acquainted, personally, with a number of men who were murdered by this bunch of hell-bound skunks, including Ranger Jones and Jack Tisdale, who were among the first to be butchered, waylaid, and shot in the back.

I suppose that all those who were in charge of this bunch of ex-deputy marshals and cut-throats shipped in from Oklahoma, are in the coal business with Satan by this time, as the gates of hell were then—and are now—standing open for them.

The arch-killer of that bunch was . . . a high state official . . . and died a few years ago while in the employ of . . . a cattle association . . . which calls to my mind the song, "Frank Canton and His Gang," which became very popular during the Nineties in that part of the cow-country.

I recall some fifteen or twenty years ago, the president of one of the leading Chicago commission houses . . . that owned a big ranch across the line in So. Dakota—and, by the way which took an active part in the murder of these people in Johnson County—writing several articles which were pubblished in their little stockyards paper. But I think he failed absolutely, as the outside world was not interested, and those on the inside knew that every word was a lie.

In another of your issues, I note some comment on the Big Die, or hard winter of 1886 and '87. How well I remember that little drizzle and thaw!

January 11th, '87, the range became in a few hours an ice-field for hundreds of miles. Practically all the cattle died, and a great number of the saddle horses perished. The cattle depend upon rooting the snow off the grass, but they didn't have much luck rooting the two or three inches of ice off the prairie. However, the horses could paw the thinner places open and in that way many of them came through. Citing a few ranches showing the loss, was the Maltese Cross and the Elkhorn Ranches, owned by Theodore Roosevelt, claimed about 12,000 head in '86, but they counted only between five and six hundred in '87. The Continental Cattle Company—the Hash Knife—had 30,000 head and gathered only seven hundred in the spring of '87.

The cattle all left the prairies and managed to exist on the cottonwood twigs and bushes for some weeks, but when this played out, they simply died in piles. One could walk up and down the Little Missouri and Powder Rivers for miles, and step on a dead cow at every step.

I saw a hundred and seventy-two cow heads pulled out of a two-room linecamp shack on the Hash Knife range.

Well, Straw, I think you folks are getting out the best Western that I know of, and I find many stories and articles that carry an old hand back to

*(Please turn to page 123)*

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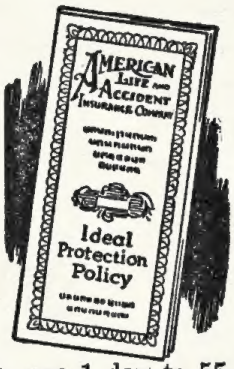


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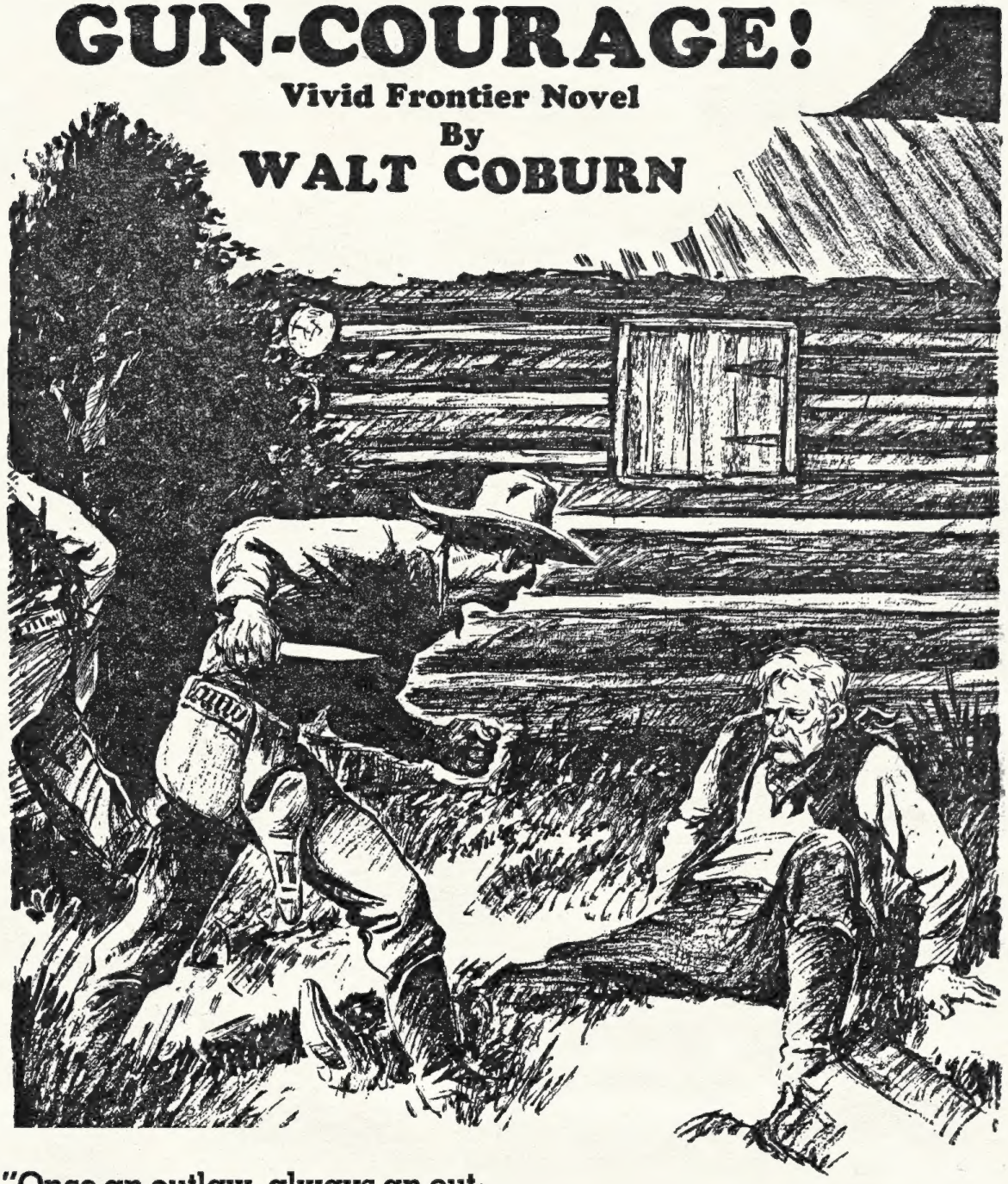
# GUN-COURAGE!

**Vivid Frontier Novel**

**By**

## WALT COBURN

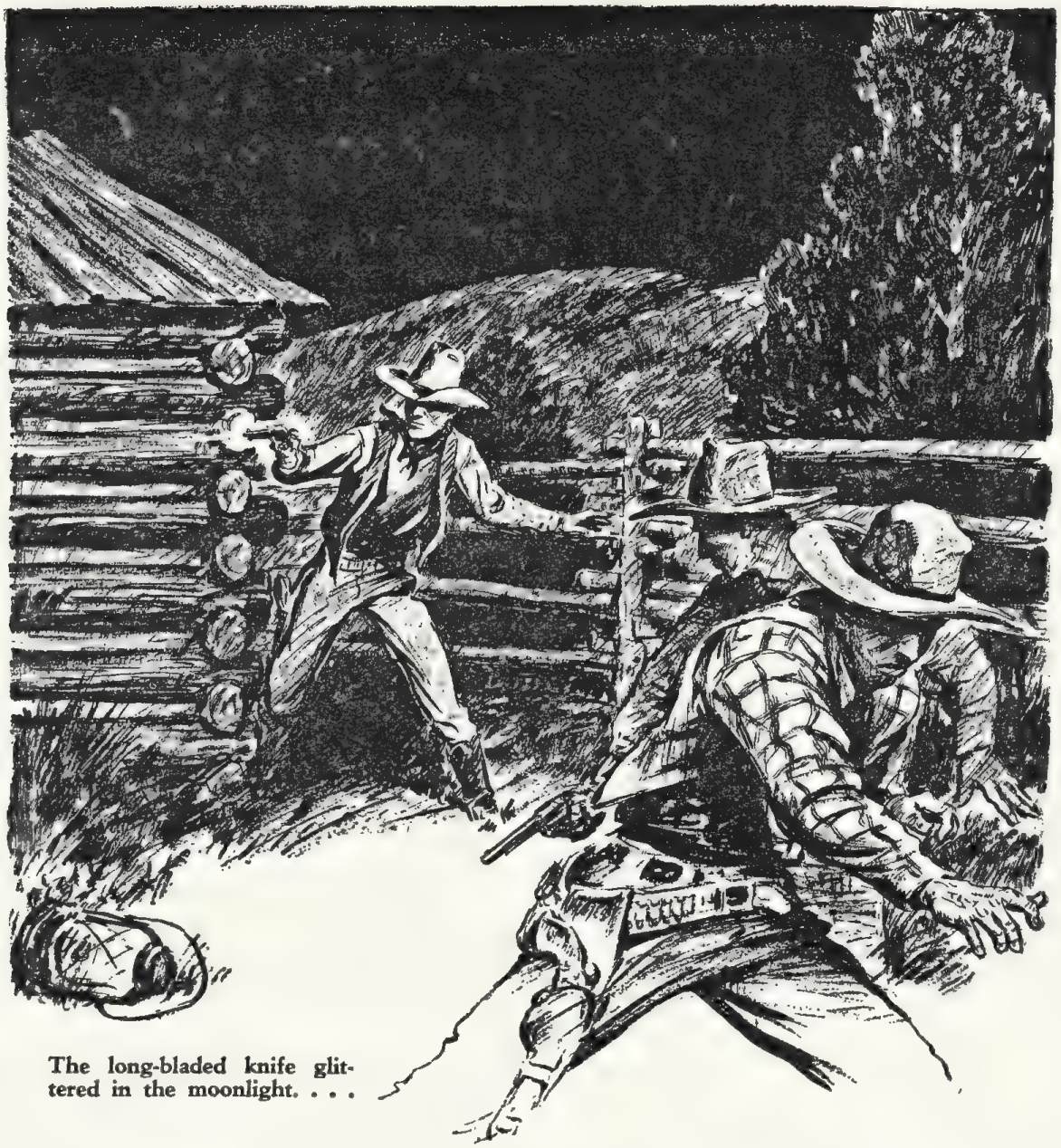


**"Once an outlaw, always an outlaw," Arizona cow-folks said of old Van Oliver, to whom Sheriff Guthrie had given another chance. . . . Young Tug Guthrie had cause to remember that when he heard the distant thunder of train-robbers' dynamite in the express car that his brother guarded. And from that minute on, Tug was declaring open season on all ex-renegades!**

### CHAPTER ONE

**"Once an Outlaw—"**

WHEN young Tug Guthrie rode down from his range-branding camp on Red Mesa to the horse camp at the Van Oliver place, he sensed that something was wrong. Almighty wrong. And grizzled old Van Oliver's attempts to cover up whatever was wrong, were clumsy and too obvious.



**The long-bladed knife glittered in the moonlight. . . .**

The old rascal's grin twitched and there was a shifty, uneasy look in his red-brown eyes. And there was the faint but unmistakable odor of corn whiskey on his breath. It had been five years and more now since old Van Oliver had taken a drink and violated his solemn promise to Sheriff Jake Guthrie.

"Long time no see yuh, Tug! I—I had a hunch you was due to show up fer a string of fresh ponies. So I got a couple of yourn shod. Like you see, I bin tackin' the shoes on your Buster pony. . . ."

"So I see, Van."

Tug Guthrie threw his string of four horses and a mouse-colored pack mule wearing a pack saddle and empty rawhide kyack boxes, into the big corral.

Old Van walked with a decided limp. One of Sheriff Jake Guthrie's .30-30 bullets had broken Van's leg in that gun-fight five years ago, when the peace officer had surprised Shorty Moon and his bank robber gang here at the Van Oliver place below the Red Mesa. The graves of two of those outlaws could be plainly seen from the corrals and cabin.

Shorty Moon and one of his gang named Jim Crawley had been badly wounded and captured, along with Van Oliver, and sent to the Arizona Territorial prison at Yuma. Only Slicker Soto, who

had more brains than guts, had gotten away from that straight-shooting sheriff. Sheriff Jake Guthrie, his tough hide ripped by two or three bullets, had brought his prisoners to jail. Then he'd gone to the hospital for four months to fight a bed-ridden battle for his life.

Because Van Oliver was a widower with two growing daughters at a convent school, Sheriff Jake Guthrie had persuaded the territorial governor to parole the bullet crippled cowman. Van Oliver had pleaded guilty to harboring the outlaws. He blamed it on whiskey and the long drouth that had wiped out most of his cattle and put a heavy mortgage on his place that he had hoped to lift with outlaw money.

For five years now the grizzled Van Oliver had abided by the parole laws. Sheriff Jake Guthrie, and his two sons Dewey and Tug, had bought the mortgage on the Van Oliver place and were making it pay.

Dewey and Tug were top cowhands. Van looked after the ranch, kept the windmill running to fill the huge watering tanks, rode fence, scattered stock salt at the salt licks back in the rough mountains, and hauled grub and horseshoes and other supplies from town to the ranch. And until now he had kept his agreement to let booze alone.

Dewey and Tug and the other brush-popper cowhands always shod their own horses. If they were in a big rush, old Van would help them, griping and bellyaching about it, always.

That was why it struck the twenty-year-old Tug as being completely out of character for Van Oliver to be tacking shoes on any horses but his own gentle string. Besides, Tug was a week early. A camp-robber had paid a visit to his range branding camp, cleaned him out of most of his grub and all his tobacco.

Tug was twenty years old but he looked and acted like a man of thirty. His hair was wiry and black and his eyes were grayish blue under heavy level black brows. In any kind of a ruckus, Tug Guthrie was hard to handle. And when it came to handling a green bronc or roping wild outlaw steers back up in the rough country, he was a top-hand.

Tug liked the old rascal Van Oliver but, like his older brother Dewey and most of the other men in that part of the Arizona cow country, he didn't trust old Van too blindly. Perhaps Tug's father, the sheriff, was the only man who actually forgave Van Oliver his faults and trusted him to the limit.

"We've all done wrong," was the big, soft-spoken sheriff's way of putting it. "We'll all do wrong again. Mistrustin' a man won't do him no good. Van Oliver's all right if he's let alone."

Tug tried to believe that now. Old Van's gnarled hands were none too steady as he began jerking loose the rope knots to slip the kyack boxes and packsaddle off the mouse-colored mule. The old renegade was making a terrific effort to keep the whiskey thickness from his tongue. There was a grayish tinge to the old leather color of his skin and he kept wiping sweat from his eyes.

"Who's bin here, Van?"

"How's that, Tug?" Old Van straightened up with a jerk. But he did not turn around. He went back to his fumbling work.

"Where'd you git it?"

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VAN OLIVER was a small, wiry man with round shoulders and saddle-warped legs. Somehow he always made Tug think of the strips of jerky hung to dry in the sun. Despite his crippled leg he had a quick way of moving. His mouth twitched under its tobacco-stained mustache. He threw the rawhide kyack boxes and pack saddle on the ground and lurched around to face the young cowpuncher. Van Oliver had a waspish temper and a vitriolic tongue.

"What the hell you drivin' at, you young whippersnapper? Where'd I git which?"

"It takes more than onions and chewin' tobacco to kill that likker breath, Van." Tug was grinning but his eyes were as cold and hard as tempered steel. "Not that I give a damn, but Jake would feel like he'd bin lied to if somebody told him you was hittin' the likker. Some folks don't like you. Booze busts your parole. I ain't preachin' to a man old enough to be my daddy, but it don't look to me like a

jug is worth goin' back to the Yuma pen."

"Nobody'll know," rasped Van Oliver, "unless you turn squealer."

"Not much danger of that, Van. I wouldn't want Kit or Lou to get hurt thataway."

Kit and Lou were old Van's two daughters. Kit, the younger girl, had a job at the court house keeping books. Lou taught school. Tug Guthrie thought a lot of Kit Oliver. Dewey took Lou to the dances.

Little old Van Oliver had done his best to whip up a desperate show of indignation and anger. But mention of his two daughters wilted him quickly. The blaze of anger died from his eyes leaving them soft red brown like a friendly dog's.

"I bin sufferin' bad, Tug. Rheumatiz in this damn' game laig. Ain't slept fer the pain. By the Devil's own chance I come on a ol' jug I'd fergot I had planted all them years. . . ."

The little old cowman was doing a poor job of lying. He seemed upset all out of proportion to the minor violation of that clause of his parole. There was a terrible desperation behind that look in his eyes that puzzled Tug and made him feel sorry for the older man.

"I'd bust the jug, Van," Tug unsaddled and turned his sweating horse loose to roll in the dust, "and tough the pain out. Let's just forget it. I'm obliged to you for shoein' my horses. Any mail?"

"I fetched a gunnysack half full from Mesquite. Ain't opened it. It's in the bunkhouse."

Mesquite was only a water tank stop and side track and loading pens. The cow outfits shipped cattle from there, and passenger trains stopped only long enough to take on water. But Dewey Guthrie worked, as he was working now, in between round-ups, as an express guard or shotgun guard, as they were called. And when the train stopped for water he threw off a gunnysack with the mail from town and what newspapers and magazines he could find. Van Oliver rode the ten miles to Mesquite to pick up the bulky sack twice a week.

Mail, newspapers, old magazines, are always welcome at a lonely cow camp.

And there should be a letter or two from Kit Oliver.

It was when Tug started to jerk loose the tie knot on the whang leather string that closed the mouth of the gunnysack that he caught Van Oliver in another lie. Dewey always tied the sack shut with a peculiar knot. The whang leather string had another type of knot.

Usually Van Oliver opened the mail sack. There was no need that Tug could figure out, for old Van to lie about it. He'd opened the sack, then tied it shut again.

As Tug stared at the square knot he became aware that old Van Oliver was standing in the doorway behind him, watching him. The old cowman's face was as gray now as old ashes. Fear—stark, naked fear—showed in his red-brown eyes.

Tug jerked the knot loose and shook the contents of the sack out on his empty bunk: Newspapers, a saddle catalog, some magazines, but no letters; no first or second class mail of any kind. Kit never failed to write him at least once a week. And the latest newspaper bore a week old date.

Tug was scowling, puzzled and annoyed as he pawed through the old newspapers and magazines. He heard old Van say something about it was gettin' on to'rds noon and dinner time and he'd get grub started.

When he was left alone, Tug stared around the empty bunkhouse. Looking for anything that might give him some clue to old Van's strange behavior.

Somebody had been here not later than last night. There were some littered cigarette butts on the floor near a couple of the bunks. An empty whiskey bottle in a far corner, its neck broken. Van Oliver was as clean around the bunkhouse or cook cabin as a woman. But he hadn't swept out this morning. He hadn't taken the time. He'd been too busy shoeing horses.

One of those freshly shod horses was a big bay called Redman. Redman was one of Dewey's top horses. And Dewey, riding the railway express car as shotgun guard, wouldn't be needing any of his cow-horses for a month. There was something wrong. Wrong as almighty hell around here.

There was no use questioning Van

Oliver. That little old rascal would either flare up into a cussing temper or close up tighter than a sprung wolf trap.

Tug decided on his course of action and went on to the cook cabin where Van Oliver was starting a fire in the little sheet-iron stove.

As he dippered water into the big tin washbasin and reached for the soap he talked to old Van's back as the latter moved around the kitchen. The wash bench and clean roller towel were in a small lean-to shed just outside the kitchen and Tug covertly watched through the open doorway into the kitchen as he voiced his impromptu plans.

"I'll round up the horse pasture after we eat, Van. The feed at the upper horse camp is goin' plumb to waste. This time of the year, in the summer, it's cooler up there an' not so many flies. I'm movin' the remuda up there till it's time to start the round-up next month. You kin help me git the cavvy up there and you kin git back here by day after tomorrow. Your big tank is filled. You kin shut down the windmill till you git back. We'll leave just your two-three ol' gentle horses here and—"

Tug soaped his hands and face and sloshed water on his sweat-matted hair as he watched the old cowman through spread fingers.

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OLD Van gripped the edge of the table like he needed its support to keep him on his two feet. And there was a stricken look on his seamed, leathery face like he had been kicked hard in the belly. His voice was as creaky as an old rusty hinge.

"I—I can't made out to go with yuh, Tug. This damn' laig won't stand that long a ride. Anyhow I got two posts to set in the pasture fence an' a job of tinkerin' to do on the windmill, before she busts down. I got to hook the team to the buckboard and fetch out a new dingus fer the pump and a couple kegs of horseshoes an' some grub. Gittin' low on beanses, an' them damned weevils has got into the flour again and I got to fetch some from town. . . .

"There's plenty feed in the pasture, an' no flies to speak of. Ain't a bit of sense in movin' the remuda now. Jake will raise hell if them horses is shoved up on the mountain. I heard him'n Dewey say the round-up would commence early.

"You ain't ramroddin' this outfit, boy. Leave Dewey do the bossin' around here. I can't leave here nohow. I'm doctorin' ten-fifteen head of cows fer screw worms. Got to rope an' hogtie 'em an' doctor 'em. I'm a-doin' the work of half a dozen men an' you want me to let that work pile up while I help you move that remuda that don't need no change of pasture. You tend to your range brandin'. I'll run this ranch I bin a-runnin' fer forty years. . . ."

The roller towel hid Tug Guthrie's flat-lipped grin and the cold suspicion in his eyes. He rubbed his head dry and left a lot of dirt on the clean roller towel. Which under normal circumstances would have gotten him a cussing-out from old Van. But the little old renegade stood there, talked dry of excuses or arguments, looking desperate and sick inside and older than his sixty years.

Tug's suspicion was tempered by something like pity. He nodded and grinned faintly and told old Van to tuck in his shirt-tail. If he wanted the remuda kept here that badly, all right; let 'em graze the feed down to the roots and wear their tails off fighting flies.

"I'll tack shoes on my horses and get back to camp by late night, before them camp robbers ride off with my bedroll an' tepee. I'll borrow your saddle gun and what .30-30 ca'tridges you've got, Van. Somebody robbed my camp. The next time they come, I'm goin' to be layin' for 'em."

"I—I swapped my Winchester, Tug. Didn't have no need fer it. Throwed in what ca'tridges I had on hand."

"I thought that saddle gun belonged to Dewey," said Tug.

"I traded Dewey outa it," Old Van's back was turned. His voice sounded strained, unconvincing.

Another lie. Tug had seen the carbine barrel sticking out from under old Van's tarp and blankets in the bunkhouse. He waited for the old cowman to make his excuse to get the gun and hide it. Which Van Oliver did in a few minutes, muttering something about needing something or

other he'd left at the bunkhouse, and for Tug to keep an eye on the coffee and frying meat.

Who had stopped here last night and fed old Van Oliver whiskey? Who had tampered with the sack of mail? Why had old Van shod four of the best, toughest, fastest horses in the Guthrie remuda? Why was he so set on keeping the horse cavvy here? Why did he want to stay close to the ranch? Why was he lying about his .30-30 saddle carbine and hiding it and the cartridges for it? What in the name of all hell was going on around this old outlaw hangout called the Van Oliver place?

Old Van showed distinct relief when Tug had said he was returning to his range camp on Red Mesa that evening. The old rascal was still sweating with uneasiness, and he wanted Tug to get back to his camp on the high timbered mesa that looked almost directly down on the little water tank railroad stop of Mesquite.

So Tug changed his plans. He'd get back to camp before nine o'clock that night. The west-bound passenger train stopped at Mesquite around nine. From the camp on Red Mesa, Tug Guthrie could see the lights of the train. And in the clear rarefied Arizona night air the sound of the locomotive whistle carried clearly to the cowpuncher's lone camp, five miles up in the hills.

Whenever Dewey rode the train as shotgun guard he had the engineer or fireman signal his younger brother with the locomotive whistle. They had a list of code signals, like the Morse telegraph code, only a few long or short toots meant a whole sentence.

The mournful blast of the locomotive whistle might prove a more or less minor annoyance to fussy passengers, but it gave a lonely young cowpuncher news of his father and brother or a message from Kit, his girl. And nobody but the train crew the wiser. The train crew and old Shanty Shane, the section boss at Mesquite.

Tug Guthrie was wasting no more time baiting old Van Oliver. The old renegade was breaking his parole, one way or another, and was scared out of his boots by something. And old Van didn't spook easy.

If something was as wrong as it appeared to Tug, then Dewey Guthrie, riding shotgun guard for the railway express, would know about it. The locomotive would send its code signal warning into the moonlit night. And Tug Guthrie might be able to use that message and back it with action.

Tug and Dewey Guthrie and their sheriff father had been like three brothers since that time five years ago when the grizzled sheriff had worked lone-handed against tough odds to clean out the outlaw gang at the Van Oliver place. Dewey and Tug had sworn to keep always in close touch with their father. So that if danger threatened the big peace officer, they would be able to get there in time to side him in a tight.

And that danger would always threaten as long as Slicker Soto, brainiest and deadliest of that outlaw gang, was still at large.

Slicker Soto had sent word years ago that the game was not over. Sometime, he said, he would kill Jake Guthrie, and not even the Yuma pen was strong enough to hold his pardners Shorty Moon and the long-geared Jim Crawley. At long, irregular intervals since that first warning, its grim threat had been repeated by letters that had come by mail to Sheriff Jake Guthrie.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Midnight Warning

FOR a man of his age and small build, Van Oliver was exceptionally strong and active in spite of his game leg. And his skill at horseshoeing was a by-word. He could trim, shape and level a horse's hoof, fit a shoe and get it nailed on and the horsenails clinched in shorter time than it took the ordinary cowhand to start with his rasp. And the horseshoe fitted so well to the shaped hoof that you couldn't slide a cigarette paper in between. A horse shod by Van Oliver never threw a shoe in any kind of a wild race in the rocks. Once old Van worked up his first sweat, he took pride and enjoyment in the back-torturing labor.

Now it seemed to Tug that old Van Oliver was working even faster than usual, but there were little flaws in his usually faultless work. His hands were unsteady and he kept sliding furtive glances across his shoulder.

His uneasiness at last claimed Tug like some contagious disorder and he found himself watching the brush-bordered trail down from the ridge and the wagon trail from town. And he became more convinced that he and old Van Oliver were being watched by somebody hidden out not too far away. Perhaps somebody had even been here at the ranch and ducked out of sight when Tug hazed his little bunch of saddle horses and pack mule into sight.

Tug and old Van both wore leather chaps for shoeing aprons. Tug had taken off his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter, to rid himself of their cumbersome burden. He had taken off his hat and stripped to his undershirt because the day was warm. Sweat wet his thick wiry black hair and made tiny rivers through the dust that powdered his flushed face. Like old Van, he kept glancing around in all directions as he worked. And old Van was covertly watching him when he slid his six-shooter from its holster and laid it in the wooden box with the horsenails and rasp and knife and shoeing hammer.

While Van Oliver shod his fifth and last horse, Tug cinched the pack saddle on the mouse-colored Mexican mule, looped the rawhide kyack boxes into place and led the mule over to the little frame building where a small grub supply was kept. As he helped himself to the grub he noticed that there was no sign of those bug pests called weevils in any of the flour. So old Van Oliver had lied once more.

He saddled one of his horses, opened the corral gate to let out the others, and took his brief leave of old Van Oliver.

"So long, Van. See you when I git back."

Old Van Oliver wiped the sweat from his face, rubbed the palm of his gnarled hand along his blue denim thigh, and shoved his hand toward the young cowpuncher. There was a queer, defeated look in the red brown eyes of the little old cowman.

"If anything happens to me, Tug, I'd be proud an' content to know you'll take good care of the Kitten. . . . Lou is older and

leveler headed, an' her an' Dewey is as good as married. But little Kit is my baby. . . ."

Tug gripped the older man's hand. "I'll take good care of Kit, yes, sir. And looky here, Van, if you're into some kind of a damn' tight, I'll side you—"

Old Van Oliver shook his head. Fear and alarm showed again in his eyes. "No, no, boy! None a-tall! It ain't nothin'. You git on back to your camp on the Red Mesa. Don't come down off the mesa. Leave me an' my chores alone, boy. Git goin'." Old Van all but slapped Tug's horse across the rump with the shoeing hammer, he was that eager for the young cowpuncher to pull out.

Tug Guthrie started his pack mule and string of horses along the trail and followed them. In a few minutes, the little ranch was lost to sight behind him and he was following the trail that twisted in and out of thick patches of mesquite and catclaw brush. He hated to leave old Van Oliver alone back yonder. But the old cowman had seemed so almighty anxious to get rid of him, that staying there would have been an unpleasant ordeal. Old Van had done everything but order him off the ranch he no longer owned.

It was not until Tug was several miles on his way and the sun was setting that he remembered something that, like the smell of whiskey, was unfamiliar about old Van Oliver. Now, with a sort of shock, he recalled what it was. Old Van always packed a wooden-handled six-shooter shoved into the waistband of his faded overalls.

Today he had seemed only partly dressed without that long-barreled single-action gun sagging the waistband of his levis. Old Van Oliver had somehow lost his six-shooter. That could be the reason why he was so unwilling to part with that .30-30 saddle carbine he'd cached out in the bunkhouse under his tarp-covered bed.

There was the unmistakable smell of bad danger back there at the old Van Oliver place that had once been an outlaw way station. But whatever that danger was, old Van Oliver wanted to be alone with it.

Tug Guthrie had plenty of time now to think it over. Those farewell words of old Van's haunted him. And Tug could not help but recall what two-thirds or more of that part of the cowcountry was always repeating when the name of Van Oliver was mentioned.

They said—and backed their opinions with money, even offering odds to any taker—that some day old Van Oliver would bust loose. That he would go back on his promise to Sheriff Jake Guthrie, violate his parole, and throw in with some outlaw gang. They said that the Law could never take the renegade out of old Van's tough blood.

Time had been when Van Oliver's range was well stocked with cattle that wore his Mashed O brand. He owned a remuda of top cow-horses. He was prosperous. Married to a good looking ranch woman and he just about worshipped her and his two young daughters. But even when Van Oliver was a hard-working, prosperous cowman, there was that whispered rumor that Van had once ridden with an outlaw bunch, till he fell in love with the girl he married and quit the Outlaw Trail to settle down.

When Van's wife died, he took it hard. Not even his love for the two growing girls had been strong enough to take her place in his cowman's heart. He'd begun drinking. He sent the two girls to a convent boarding school and batched at his ranch below Red Mesa. And gradually the news spread that Van Oliver was furnishing horses to drifting outlaws, that he was peddling them whiskey and cartridges. That the Van Oliver place was an outlaw way station and blind post office.

He and his ranch got a tough name. He no longer welcomed the occasional visits of his neighboring cowmen.

Then the bank at town had been held up. And lone handed, Sheriff Jake Guthrie had trailed the bank robbers to the Van Oliver place. He had shot it out with them and hauled his wounded prisoners to town in Van Oliver's buckboard. He'd brought those whispered rumors about Van Oliver right out into the open.

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SHERIFF JAKE had collected fat bounty money on that outlaw gang. Nobody knew just how much reward money he did get. But whatever the

amount was, he used every dollar of it to pay off the heavy mortgage on the Van Oliver place.

Van had purposely mortgaged it to get ready cash for a fast getaway, just in case the Law tripped him up. His range had been fairly well cleaned of cattle before the long drouth hit the country, and for the same purpose. But nobody, not even his daughters or Sheriff Jake Guthrie, knew what Van Oliver had done with the cash money he'd gotten on the mortgage and cattle sales.

Save for the Mashed O remnant cattle, the range was now stocked with cattle wearing the Guthrie Star brand. Dewey and Tug Guthrie ran the outfit. Their cowhands rode Star horses. Through the influence of Sheriff Jake Guthrie, Van Oliver had been paroled. He was kept there at the Van Oliver place, pensioned off like the handful of stove-up Mashed O saddle horses in the big pasture.

The cow-country said of Van Oliver that he was too almighty prideful and too damned ornery to stay pensioned off like his worn out horses. They were betting that one of these times old Van would bust loose. He was branded an outlaw, and that was one brand that could never be vented!

Lou and Kit Oliver were old enough now to look out for themselves. They had the education and good looks and brains to get along in the world. A tough old renegade father who had done time in the pen was more of a dead weight and handicap than he was help to the two girls. The sooner old Van quit the country, the better for his daughters. That was the talk among cow-folks.

Sheriff Jake Guthrie told Dewey and Tug always to talk away from that kind of argument. The big, soft-spoken sheriff who had sent Van Oliver to prison then hauled him out again, knew Van Oliver far better, he told his two sons, than ever the cowcountry would know old Van. Jake Guthrie said that Van Oliver's love for his two daughters was far bigger than any temptation to take to the Outlaw Trail.

"Old Van give me his word as a man," said Jake Guthrie. "He'd rather die than go back on his word."

When Sheriff Jake Guthrie found out that both his sons had taken some of those bigger bets that old Van would bust loose, he smiled to himself and said nothing to either Dewey or Tug. And when Tug, quicker tempered than his older brother Dewey, got into a fight or two and whipped the fear into somebody that tried to slur the clean names of the two Oliver girls, the sheriff made no mention of it to his hard-fisted younger son.

Now Tug Guthrie was plenty worried. He wished Dewey was here. But about a week ago Sheriff Jake Guthrie had sent a messenger out to the range branding camp Dewey and Tug then shared on Red Mesa. He said that the railway express company wanted to hire Dewey Guthrie again for shotgun guard. For Dewey to name his own salary but to get on the job as fast as he could report for duty.

The rustling of the leaves along the Outlaw Trail said that a train robbery was being cooked up. The news had reached Sheriff Jake Guthrie from a secret but reliable source. Probably, said the deputy, through some range detective posing as a renegade and trailing with some outlaw gang.

Tug had wanted to go along with Dewey but his older brother had shown him their father's message. An underlined postscript told Tug to stay at his range branding camp on Red Mesa. And disobedience was one thing their otherwise tolerant father would not allow.

Dewey and Tug took Jake Guthrie's orders. Though the sheriff usually worded his orders like a mild request.

"Keep your ears clean, Tug," Dewey had grinned, "and your eyes peeled. Have a loop cocked to pick up their front feet if I haze them train robbers to'rds Red Mesa."

Sheriff Jake Guthrie's deputy had left his saddle gun and a box of .30-30 cartridges with Tug. But a saddle gun is bothersome to a brush-popper cowhand in the rough country. Tug had left the saddle carbine and cartridges at camp. The gun and ammunition had been taken by the camp robbers who had paid Red Mesa a coyote visit.

That put Tug Guthrie at a decided disadvantage now. Anybody wanting to stop him could stay beyond six-shooter range

and knock him out of his saddle with a .30-30 before he got close enough to use his gun.

That feeling of uneasiness he had picked up from old Van back yonder rode with him now. His eyes shifted restlessly and he listened for sounds of men on horseback and watched the brush and boulders along the trail. His gun hand stayed near the butt of his holstered six-shooter. He was pretty jumpy.

It was after dark when he reached camp on the high Red Mesa. Everything at camp was exactly as he'd left it. No boot tracks marred the surface of the dirt he's smoothed over around his bed and dutch ovens and skillet and coffee pot neatly piled and covered with a strip of old canvas tarp. So far as he could tell, nobody had been here.

He unloaded the pack mule, unsaddled, staked out a night horse, then built a supper fire. He wolfed his supper and washed it down with strong black coffee and cleaned up his dishes. Then he took the field glasses he carried in a leather case on his saddle, and went out on the red rimrock that looked down on the little water tank railroad stop. There he settled down to wait for the westbound train to stop at Mesquite. And for Dewey's locomotive whistle signal.

Last night and the night before that and as on previous nights the signal had been the monotonous same: "O.K." And a long wailing ending, by way of adios, as the train pulled out again.

But tonight Tug Guthrie's nerves were edgey. Some instinct kept warning him in advance that the O.K. signal would be changed. He kept looking at the hands of his heavy silver-backed watch.

The minutes dragged along with a torturing slowness. He had taken his station an hour before that train was due to stop for water at Mesquite. Now he itched and fretted and smoked one cigarette after another. He kept focusing the powerful field glasses on the red and green specks of railroad switch lights. The light in Shanty Shane's house across and up the tracks from the stockyards.

By straight air line the distance between the red rimrock and the Mesquite station below was no more than four or five miles. But Red Mesa was straight-walled and the nearest trail down was perhaps ten miles toward the Van Oliver place. And it was about eight or ten miles by trail or short cut from the Van Oliver place to Mesquite.

Tug Guthrie forced himself to quit looking at his watch. He put down the field glasses and began picking out the big stars in the sky. The moon pushed up over the ragged black skyline, following its glow into the starlit universe above. Round and white, shedding its moonlight across the broken country. The coyotes yapped and back in the piñons a tecolote owl called to another of its kind.

Then, from that flat desert country below sounded the mournful wail of a locomotive whistle.

Tug Guthrie grabbed his field glasses and squatted on his hunkers to focus the twin lenses on the locomotive headlight and the tiny moving specks that were the lighted windows of the passenger cars.

It took long minutes for the train lights to reach Mesquite station. The train halted. The locomotive whistle began sounding its coded O.K. signal. Part way through, the whistle went suddenly silent, as if whoever was pulling the whistle cord had been rudely interrupted.

Tug Guthrie was on his feet, standing with his long bowed legs widespread. Every nerve in his system was pulled taut now, every muscle tensed. His hands, holding the field glasses against his eyes, trembled a little. The palms of his hands were moist now with clammy sweat.

Something had happened down there at that stopped train. And something was happening now. The locomotive whistle was silent and that silence was ominous.

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THEN he picked up the locomotive headlight moving slowly ahead. But as it moved on into the night, the lights of the passenger coaches remained stationary and the black gap between them and the moving locomotive was slowly but surely widening. Until Tug figured that at least a mile, perhaps two miles, separated the locomotive from the passenger coaches.

Tug Guthrie's brain was racing now. That locomotive was not traveling alone.

It would be pulling the mail and express cars that had been uncoupled from the rest of the train. From here, high up on the flat rimrock of Red Mesa, Tug Guthrie knew that he was watching the lighted signs of a train hold-up. And his brother Dewey Guthrie was riding shotgun guard in the railway express car.

Now the locomotive headlight was motionless. There was that long black gap between it and the lighted passenger coaches and diner. Then, from down there below, faintly, but unmistakably, came the muffled sound of an explosion.

Just preceding the sound of the explosion the field glasses had picked up a brief spurt of orange-yellow flame a short distance behind the locomotive.

The sound of the blast told its story to Tug Guthrie. The train robbers had blown open the door of the express car. And Tug's straining ears seemed to pick up the sounds of gunfire. But the distance was far, and it could be his imagination. His own heart thumped as loudly.

The field glasses glued to the lights, ears strained, nerves and muscles tensed, Tug Guthrie had to stand here on the high rimrock, absolutely helpless and unable to side his brother who might be dying or dead in that damned explosion.

Tug felt the cold, clammy sweat trickling down his ribs from under his armpits. He had to force himself to stay rooted here on the flat rimrock. He wanted to get on his horse, get back to the Van Oliver place, and get down there.

This was what had ailed old Van Oliver. That damned old renegade had known this was going to happen. He'd thrown in again with his old outlaw outfit. Busted his parole, broken his word of honor as a man, helped them plan and carry out the train hold-up. No wonder the old snake was hitting the booze. He needed the stuff to deaden his black conscience, give him the guts to play out his sneaking, double-crossing game.

He'd shod those horses to give his train robbing amigos fresh, well shod horses when they reached the Van Oliver place. They'd cover that first eight or ten miles with the unslacking speed of pony express riders. Change to fresh mounts at the Van Oliver place. Maybe take time out to divide the proceeds of their train robbery haul before they split up and scattered into the rough broken mountains. That's what had been bothering old Van Oliver today.

No wonder he wanted to get rid of Tug Guthrie—send Tug back to the Red Mesa camp and out of the way so he couldn't kill off any of that train-robbing outfit, who had probably killed Dewey Guthrie when Dewey refused to unlock the express car.

They'd have to kill Dewey to get to the steel strongboxes he guarded. Damn their murdering hearts! And the sneaking, double-crossing heart of old Van Oliver! Van Oliver, who would be dying of prison plague, if big hearted Jake Guthrie hadn't gotten him out of the hell-hole called Yuma. Now old Van Oliver was helping those renegades murder the son of Sheriff Jake Guthrie. . . .

The shrill blast of the locomotive whistle yanked Tug out of his murderous mood. Long and short blasts. Pauses. Short and long. Spelling out in their own code what had happened.

Tug had to put down the glasses and get the stubby pencil and tally book from the pocket of his old denim brush jacket. His pencil put down the coded letters as they spelled out the message:

*"Build. . . . your. . . . loop. . . . Van. . . . place. . . . Luck. . . ."*

## CHAPTER THREE

### Outlaw Wolf-Trap

PERHAPS Dewey Guthrie had explained his and Tug's code to the train crew and Shanty Shane, section boss at Mesquite. Sheriff Jake Guthrie knew it because he had helped his two sons shorten sentences into single words and had cut down the number of messages to those of vital importance.

It was fifty miles by wagon road from the Van Oliver place to town, and that locomotive whistle could get urgent news to the ranch. Van Oliver knew the code. And every pair of ears that heard those toots and wails would be warned.

On a railroad, very few things could be disastrous enough for that prolonged warning in the still of night: A train wreck, a hold-up, a bad accident of some

kind. Cowmen on their ranches, brush-popper cowhands in their range-branding camps would saddle up and head for Mesquite to find out what had happened. Even as they would turn out to the last man to fight a brush fire on the open range.

The train robbers would not be likely to decode the whistled signals. But they'd know it was a blatant warning of disaster, and they'd curse the sound for whatever it might mean. They'd be crowding their horses to make a fast getaway. It would be like setting off a burglar alarm, and they'd cover those eight or ten miles to the Van Oliver place in faster horseback time than had ever been made, shooting down anybody that blocked their way. They'd be there and gone long before Tug Guthrie could get down from Red Mesa by way of the main trail. Even if Tug crowded his horse to the limit, they could make three times faster time covering about the same distance he had to go to head them off.

There was only one other way down. Even in broad daylight only the wildest, most hairbrained and reckless brush-popper cowhand would tackle that route. And he'd need a mighty sure-footed and wise-headed horse.

It was moonlight, but a lot of that treacherous going would be shadowed by rocks and brush. There wasn't a horse in Tug's string that had ever gone down that slant. But the mouse-colored Mexican mule was quick as a cat, sure-footed as a goat, and ornery enough to be wise. He'd used the mule for leading wild steers down to the trap pasture. A cowboy cut no dashing moving-picture figure astride the little mule, but that cowhand was anything but afoot in the roughs when he rode Pancho Villa.

It took a few minutes to locate and saddle the long-eared Pancho. Then Tug had to rig his saddle with the breeching from the pack saddle, in addition to the breast strap harness. Haste made Tug's hands the more clumsy and fumbling. He was wet with sweat when he swung into the saddle.

Five years ago, when young Tug had gotten word his sheriff father had been shot and was fighting for his life in the little cowtown hospital, Tug had ridden this same little gruya Mexican mule down that treacherous slant. Five years but added to the little mule's sure-footed skill in getting places where the average cowhorse would refuse to go.

"Here we go once more, Pancho," Tug's flat lipped grin was mirthless. "Git me down there, pardner!"

Up here on the brush-spotted Red Mesa it was moonlight. But looking over the flat rim, all Tug Guthrie could make out was the huge black maw of the brushy canyon below. Mule and cowhand needed all the luck in the world right now.

Tug let the mule stand there for a moment, long ears tipped forward, head lowered. Then the Pancho Villa mule swung its head up and down once or twice as if to make certain Tug had a tight enough but not too tight a rein. And without the touch of a spur rowel, the tough, game-hearted little mule started down the black slant, front legs braced, hind legs set for a rump slide down the first short steep pitch.

The leather tapaderos on Tug's stirrups

scraped the ground as he shoved his long legs forward and leaned back in the saddle to keep himself and the mule on their precarious balance.

A catclaw limb whipped across his face and the sharp hooked thorns ripped deep. Loose dirt and rocks rolled down in their wake in a miniature landslide. But so swift was their haphazard descent that only a few of the bouncing rocks passed them in their downward flight.

They struck a small brush patch, lodged there for a few seconds, then slid on sideways down the loose shale. Tug's right leg was caught by the mule's weight. He felt the wrenching pain shoot from ankle to thigh. The stirrup and heavy tapadero saved his foot from being broken. The bullhide chaps protected his leg or that next slide would have peeled the hide from his leg bones. Then the little mule, all four legs kicking, shod hoofs trying desperately for footing, twisted under him and his leg slid free.

He grabbed the saddle-horn, gritted his teeth and kicked both feet free of his stirrups, hanging right to the horn. Brush, rocks and rough ground tore at his short denim jumper, ripped and tore the faded fabric, leaving his shoulder bare, bruised and bleeding. He'd lost his hat, his face was skinned, and loose dirt half blinded him.

A thick manzanita thicket stopped them until the little mule kicked and scrambled to its feet and Tug swung back into the saddle. Then the slanting earth crumpled and they were sliding down again into the darkness below, the little mule taking it like a boy wearing out the seat of his pants on a toboggan slide.

Tug, dazed, shaken and bruised, tried his best to keep balanced. Then the steep slant broke off into a sheer drop, that seemed a jump-off into nothingness.

Mule and rider somersaulted as if they'd been shot through the air by a giant sling wielded by some unseen hand.

Tug let go the reins, kicked his legs free, and felt himself turning over in the air as he was thrown clear. Then mule and man landed with a loud crash on a heavy manzanita thicket that saved their bones. But Tug's head struck the thick butt of a manzanita and he went out like a light.

TUG GUTHRIE came alive with the taste of dirt and blood in his mouth. His head was splitting with pain and he had to rub away dirt and sweat before he could blink his eyes open. He was bruised and lame, his clothes torn almost off above the belt line of his chaps. But the trigger loop had kept his six-shooter in its holster. He scrambled his way out of the heavy brush patch.

The tough little Pancho Villa mule stood motionless in the sandy wash, long ears drooping sideways, blowing hard.

Tug let the game little mule get his wind before he tightened the cinches then he mounted and headed down the dry wash.

That swift, dangerous slide had saved them precious time and long, rough miles. They were only a few miles from the Van Oliver place and the trail led down the dry wash, the going easy. Tug wiped the sand from his gun and rode with it in his brush-ripped hand.

The pain in his head settled down to a dull, throbbing ache. He kept spitting blood and dirt. Above the waist he was almost naked, his white hide scratched and bleeding, but he had no broken bones and he was eager to tackle whatever odds lay in wait for him at the Van Oliver place.

He had his wind back and his brain was clear and he was riding warily when he sighted the corrals and buildings of the little ranch. A light showed in the bunkhouse. A lantern moved over near the corrals. Then the night's quiet was shattered by a man's hoarse scream of agony. The sound choked off into an ugly, coughing rattle. Then a loud, anger-shaken voice was cursing.

"Talk fast, you damned old two-faced, law-lovin' son of a snake! Where's them horses? Heat a runnin' iron, Crawley. He'll give up head a-plenty."

"While he's a-talkin', Shorty, ask him where he's buried his damn' money. Unless Slicker's already lifted the old rascal's cache. How about it, Slicker?"

"You're wasting time, Crawley. I sprung you two hombres outa the Yuma pen. If I got Van Oliver's hid-out money, I earned it. I had to spend twice that much oilin' the hinges on them prison

gates. You'll save time if you let old Van alone and ride out there with Big Dutch and wrangle that horse pasture. He had four horses shod an' waitin' for us when I left here after supper. . . .

"Why'd you leave him alone, then?" snarled the first loud voice that Tug had heard.

"Why? Because I didn't trust you gents to get the job done right. All three of you are prison locoed. Smokin' that damn' marijuana. . . ."

"You'll smoke anything," came Shorty Moon's voice, "anything you kin git inside the Yuma pen. Don't talk outa turn, you slick-fingered, slick-tongued tinhorn. If we're set afoot here, it's your bad luck. You won't git away this trip. Crawley, walk them horses we bin ridin' till they cool off. I'll work on Van Oliver. If he's really hid them relay horses, Big Dutch will still be huntin' 'em when we haul outa here on them laig-weary geldin's."

"They won't pack a man of us a mile fu'ther, Shorty. Yourn has laid down. Won't git back on his laigs. I busted an aig in mine. He's blowin' like a steam engine—wind broke. And yonder comes Big Dutch, afoot. I knowed his horse'd drop dead under 'im. We crowded them ponies too hard, Shorty. I kep' tellin' yuh."

"Let me try some persuasion' on our old compadre Van," Slicker Soto had a voice that sounded like tearing silk. "Pour more whiskey down his gullet. . . . Dammit, Shorty, you've killed the old buzzard!"

"Naw. Just choked down some. Sling that bucket uh water in his face, Crawley. If us fellers make it a Winchester standoff here, you ain't gittin' no chance to rabbit on us, mister."

"But our old compadre Van won't think so," sounded that ripping silk voice. "Van is afraid of me. I've had him sweating blood around here all day. I had the fear in him. Didn't lay a hand on him, either. Just told him what would happen to his two beautiful high-toned young daughters if he double-crossed his old compadre Slicker Soto."

"But he wasn't too scared to set us afoot, you slick-tongued snake."

"Easy on that kind of talk, Shorty. I don't like it. . . . Van's comin' alive. A little likker, Van, old trapper. Shorty don't know his own strength. He's stir-crazy. Drink hearty. . . . That's it. Sit up straighter. Hold 'im up, Crawley. Get back, Shorty.

"I was just telling the boys, Van, that you'd hate to have anything happen to Lou and Kit. I forgot to tell you I decoyed the girls away from town and out to that old deserted line camp. I'm keepin' 'em there, Van. You kin set 'em free after us gents have gone. If we don't get them fresh relay horses right now, Van, we'll pull out anyhow. And we'll meet Lou and Kit before the Law gets to that line camp. I'd hate to trust my two daughters with a pair of prison birds like Shorty Moon and Jim Crawley. Where's our fresh relay horses, Compadre Van? Talk pronto!"

Tug had been letting the little mule walk towards the corrals. The small hoofs made no sound in the heavy sand of the wash. Now he reined up behind the high mesquite corrals and dismounted, crouching in the black shadows, his six-shooter gripped in his hand.

Not more than forty yards away, the four outlaws stood around old Van Oliver who was sitting up on the ground. The lanky Crawley was holding the lighted lantern that showed them all in its yellow light. There was blood on old Van Oliver's ash gray face and his thick white hair was matted with it.

Old Van was cursing them in a croaking whisper. Tug Guthrie took back everything he'd ever thought or said against that little old renegade cowman. Old Van knew that they were going to kill him but there was no fear in his voice. Only a bitter hatred for them all.

"You're a damned liar, Slicker. And you kin torture me till I die slow, but you're still afoot. I wrangled that horse pasture after you left; hazed them horses a long ways into the hills, and walked back here afoot.

"There ain't so much as a collar-marked work horse left here. Sheriff Jake Guthrie ketched your gang here before. He'll ketch you here again. But he won't leave a one of you alive this time to go to the pen. That train whistle'll fetch every cowpuncher in the country. You're ketched in your own wolf-trap, Slicker!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Renegades' Corral

NOBODY had ever given Van Oliver much credit for courage. They spoke of him as a crafty, treacherous rascal with renegade habits who would fight when cornered, even as a cowardly coyote.

Because Tug Guthrie had always shared a small part of that general opinion, he felt a little ashamed as he witnessed old Van's brittle defiance against these men who meant to kill him. And because the much maligned old cowman had never laid claim to bravery, never pretended to be anything but a blackleg rascal, this display of gameness became all the more heroic and splendid in Tug's young cowpuncher eyes.

This much Tug Guthrie knew right now: That old Van had gotten rid of him today to get him out of danger. Slicker Soto had been hidden there at the ranch all the time. Tug owed his life to old Van. And it was about time to repay the little old cowman the debt.

The four train-robbers were in the open between the high mesquite corrals and the cabins and stable and storehouse. That hulking one they called Big Dutch loomed up for the easiest target. But he was the least dangerous of them all. A huge, thick-skulled, sluggish-witted thing who obeyed orders.

Slicker Soto was the most dangerous; Shorty Moon was a close second. The lanky Jim Crawley was about on a par with the hard-bitten, cold-blooded Shorty. Both of them, according to Slicker, were under that distorted influence of marijuana, and therefore doubly dangerous.

Tug Guthrie could kill any one of the four outlaws now. He would have to kill them or be killed. He could hope for no immediate help, and his part of the gun fight would be over by the time help got here. Those renegades played for keeps.

He'd have to start shooting before they killed old Van. . . . But Tug Guthrie could not kill any man in cold blood.

He barked his warning in a hard bitten shout: "Throw away your guns! I'm the Law!"

As well shout at the stars to fall from the sky! The lanky Jim Crawley smashed the lighted lantern on the ground. They broke and ran, crouched, zig-zagging.

Slicker Soto crouched for a second beside old Van Oliver. The long-bladed knife in his hand glittered in the moonlight as it lifted to stab the old rancher. Tug's six-shooter spewed fire. Slicker Soto jerked and twisted, the knife dropping to the ground. Tug's bullet had smashed the man's shoulder.

Old Van Oliver moved with catlike swiftness in spite of his injuries. His gnarled hand grabbed the handle of the fallen knife. Then he was on top of Slicker Soto. After that first glint of naked steel the blade was red to the hilt with blood.

Tug hardly heard the scream torn from Slicker Soto's throat. Three guns were roaring. They were shooting at the flash of Tug's gun and he was returning the fire as bullets whined like hornets around him. He was crouched low in the shelter of the corral. Bullets threw splinters into his face, kicked the dirt around his feet, whining so close to his head that he ducked, pulling in his head like a desert turtle. But his nerves were steady, his brain clear, and he tried not to waste a bullet.

The other three outlaws had gained the nearby shelter of the corrals. Tug saw the shadowy bulk of a crouched man near the branding chute, saw the quick spurt of the man's gun flame. Tug shot twice, and the lanky Jim Crawley staggered as he tried to gain safer shelter. Tug's third shot was deliberate, well aimed. Jim Crawley pitched forward on his face and lay spread-eagled in the corral dust.

Out of a corner of his eye Tug had seen old Van Oliver running, bent almost double, for the shelter of the nearby corral. Old Van had dropped the knife and had grabbed up the dead Slicker's six-shooter and carbine. His creaky voice sounded so close behind him now that Tug whirled, startled by the croaking throaty chuckle.

"Thought I'd got rid of you, boy. Give Jake my word I'd keep you outa gun-trouble. How you fixed fer ca'tridges?"

Tug's belt loops were filled with .45 shells, and he had an extra box of them in his chaps pocket. He handed the box

to old Van who broke open the lid and shoved loose cartridges into the pockets of his old levis.

Shorty Moon's rasping voice was cursing on the far side of the corrals. He could see Slicker Soto's body lying on its back in the moonlight. The man who had been the wolf-brains of the outlaw gang had planned his last hold-up. Shorty Moon cursed the dead Slicker Soto.

The short, barrel-chested leader of the outlaw gang had seen the lanky Jim Crawley, made reckless by marijuana smoke, get shot down. Shorty's battered face with its piglike bloodshot eyes was twisted with insane fury at the dead Jim Crawley.

Then he was calming down. Calling out to the only living member of his outlaw gang.

"You damn' Big Dutch! Where you at?"

"I'm here, Shorty. But I ain't stayin'! I seen Crawley git his. Look at Slicker layin' yonder. We better take to the hills, Shorty."

"You try it, you big yaller-bellied Dutch, an' I'll be the man that drops yuh with a back full of lead. Fight, you big hunk of taller! Fight or I'll kill you, mister! I'm comin' to yuh. Show your toughness, big meat."

There was a shot, a loud bellow of pain, and Shorty Moon's rasping laugh. Then the tough little outlaw leader's ugly voice:

"That's just a leetle taste of what you'll git if you try to rabbit on me."

Big Dutch was moaning and cussing the pain. Then a hail of bullets from their saddle guns flattened Tug and old Van on the ground. And when the rattle of gunfire ceased and Tug had regained his crouching position, the old cowman lay motionless, his blood-matted white head pillowed in the crook of his left arm. He did not move when Tug reached out and gripped his shoulder.

Tug's belly felt suddenly cold and crawling with something like fear and panic. He was all alone now. Old Van was out of the fight for keeps. Tug released Slicker's carbine from old Van's slacked fingers. There should be four, perhaps five cartridges in the magazine and there was one in the breech of the .30-30 Winchester. The distance between him and the two outlaws was too far for accurate six-shooter work. Until he shortened that gap between himself and the renegade pair, he'd have to use the carbine.

Tug left old Van lying alongside the corral and moved cautiously along the corral.

★

SHORTY MOON and Big Dutch were starting another heavy burst of gunfire. Tug moved along the corral about thirty or forty feet, then emptied his six-hooter at their gun flashes to take their bullets away from the place where old Van lay. And by the time they were shooting at the place where they'd spotted Tug's fire, he had left there. Running, crouched, along the outside of the corral, until he was now lying flat on his belly alongside the high-sided branding chute.

He could reach out and touch the sprawled lifeless form of the dead Jim Crawley.

Around the man's lean belly were buckled two cartridge belts. One of those belts had its loops filled with .30-30 shells that Tug so badly needed to continue this hide and seek gun fight.

He put down his carbine and crawled along on his belly, until he was lying almost alongside the dead man. His groping hand was cramped by the dead weight as he felt beneath Crawley for the buckle of the cartridge belt. He could hear Shorty Moon talking in a harsh whisper,

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and hear Big Dutch's snarling protests.

Tug's fingers located the belt buckle. He worked the tongue loose and pulled. The wide, heavy belt stuck, fouled on some part of the dead man's clothing and held by Crawley's lifeless weight.

Tug took a firm, desperate grip on the end of the belt and pulled, rolling with the hard, yanking twist he gave the stubborn leather. The belt kept firm. Tug used all his strength. The hard yank pulled the body over on its side.

There was a hoarse scream from Big Dutch. "Look, Shorty! It's Crawley! Comin' alive. With his head shot to hell!"

The tough, prison hardened Shorty Moon was not given to any such fool superstitions. He must have seen the belt being pulled free. His carbine, from the other corral, was spewing streaks of flame. It's bullets were throwing dirt in Tug's face as Tug rolled over and flattened himself.

Tug crawled along the chute. The two guns had gone silent again, and Shorty Moon's rasping whisper reached him.

"Tackle 'em from that end, Dutch. I'll go in from this end. There won't be no more'n two of 'em. Git goin'."

They were going to come into the high branding chute. Along its sides were open spaces about eighteen inches wide between the planks for cowpunchers to poke their prod poles. If Big Dutch came in at one end, Shorty Moon at the other, they would trap him in the enclosure alongside the chute.

Tug had come into it, as Jim Crawley had a while ago, by way of an open gateway that led outside. If Tug ran for the gateway, they would shoot him down. If he stayed crouched alongside the chute they would riddle him with bullets.

Tug made a split second decision. The space between the planks was barely large enough for a man of Tug's build to crawl through. He slid into the chute and flattened himself on its narrow cleated floor. He was putting himself in a tight trap.

A gun-slinger would, in a few seconds, be coming into that black shadowed chute from either end. They were coming now. The chute gate at one end was opening slowly. It's rusty hinges creaked. A crouched black hulk showed for a second, then the gate creaked shut.

Tug held his fire. That bulk was too big to be Shorty Moon. It was the more deadly Shorty that Tug wanted first.

The gate at the other end of the chute creaked open. A quick-moving shadow showed. This was hand-gun range. The six-shooter in Tug Guthrie's right hand spewed fire. He thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger again, then sent a third shot at the shooting, cursing Shorty Moon before the chute gate creaked slowly shut.

Big Dutch, at the other end of the branding chute, had let out a hoarse scream of pain. One of Shorty Moon's wild bullets had struck him.

Either Shorty Moon was too tough to kill, or Tug's shooting was bad because the outlaw's gun was still spitting.

Tug took a desperate chance. His left hand reached up and gripped the lower edge of the opening along the chute. Then he stood up, shoved his head and shoulders through, swung one leg, then the other. For one horrible moment his shoulders and chest caught before he flattened himself on his belly and scraped through the narrow opening, leaving bits of torn hide behind. Inside the pitch dark chute two guns kept roaring.

For a moment Tug lay where he had dropped outside the branding chute. Then he staggered to his feet and ran. One leg gave way under him and he fell flat. That was the first he knew about the bullet hole in his leg. He lurched to his feet again, hopped, stumbled, crawled, finally rolled through the gateway and back behind the far corral where he'd left old Van. His breath came in lung-tearing sobs.

He thought he could see old Van moving. That sounded like the little old cowman's voice saying, "Thank God!"

The shooting inside the branding chute had died out and other noises were taking its place. He heard the sounds of running horses and men calling back and forth to one another. The voice of Sheriff Jake Guthrie, the younger voice of Dewey.

And that was old Van Oliver getting slowly to his feet. Old Van's creaky voice shouting, "This way, Jake! You an' Dewey got here too late. It's all done but the shoutin'. You kin take off your hats to young Tug Guthrie."

They carried Tug into the bunkhouse.

Sheriff Jake Guthrie and Dewey were both unhurt, but fear still had their faces drained of color.

AS THEY talked, Tug understood why. They had both been on the train. Warned of the coming hold-up by old Van Oliver, who was enjoying the forced company of Slicker Soto and his three jail-bird outlaw crew, Sheriff Jake had gotten old Van's secret warning sent by a passing Apache cowboy. And the sheriff had made his plans.

He'd ridden the train with his son Dewey, but they'd carried the strong box in a Pullman compartment. The train-robbers had blown open the doors of an empty express car. The actual express and mail had been routed around Mesquite.

Sheriff Jake Guthrie showed Tug the message which the Apache cowboy had handed him a few days ago. It read:

> Slicker here. Others broke the pen. Holding-up train at Mesquite Sunday night. I'm furnishing relay horses. Stay away. Keep Tug and Dewey away. Ketch your men at Mesquite.
>
> Van.

Sheriff Jake Guthrie dared not load the train with a posse for fear of scaring off the hold-up men, one or more of whom might be riding the train. He'd left two fast horses and saddles at Shanty Shane's section house.

But the outlaws had found the two saddle horses at Mesquite and turned them loose. And when they found the express car empty, they'd smelled a trap and had hightailed it. That they had left Sheriff Jake Guthrie and Dewey afoot at the station, and a good hard two-mile walk from where they'd blown open the car.

While the locomotive whistle was sending out its coded warning, Dewey handling the whistle cord, Sheriff Jake Guthrie had thrown their saddles on Shanty Shane's fat and lazy work team.

"Only that we're short winded an' a man can't travel good on high heeled boots," cussed the sheriff, "we'd of made better time afoot."

The outlaws had robbed Tug's camp on their way to the Van Oliver place to meet Slicker Soto who had managed their escape from the pen, but had traveled ahead of them to make outlaw medicine with Van Oliver. Otherwise, Tug would not have come to the ranch for grub and become suspicious. And until their plans at Mesquite had gone sadly awry, the sheriff and Dewey had no intention of letting young Tug in for any gun-danger. For the same reason, old Van had robbed the gunnysack mail, burned the late newspapers that held headline accounts of the Yuma prison escape of Shorty Moon and Jim Crawley and Big Dutch Yager. And now, old Van gave Tug letters from Kit he'd held out, for the reason that Kit would mention the prison break. . . .

Tug lay on his bunk, his leg bandaged, most of the dirt and blood sponged from his bruised, scratched hide. The Pancho Villa mule was eating his fill of grain.

At the end of the long bunkhouse lay the tarp-covered bodies of the outlaws.

Old Van Oliver and Sheriff Jake Guthrie were having a drink of Slicker Soto's good whiskey. Old Van was no longer on the Injun list in regards to whiskey drinking. Instead of a parole, he'd earned an absolute pardon. And he'd won the everlasting respect and friendship of the Arizona cowmen.

A large bunch of them were drifting to Mesquite right now. Shanty Shane was sending them on to the Van Oliver place. Soon they'd drift in, too late to fight, but in time to hear Sheriff Jake Guthrie repeat the story of Van Oliver and young Tug.

"We'll collect enough bets," grinned Tug, "to pay for our double weddin' and honeymoon, Dewey. Providin' Van is willin' to let us have his daughters."

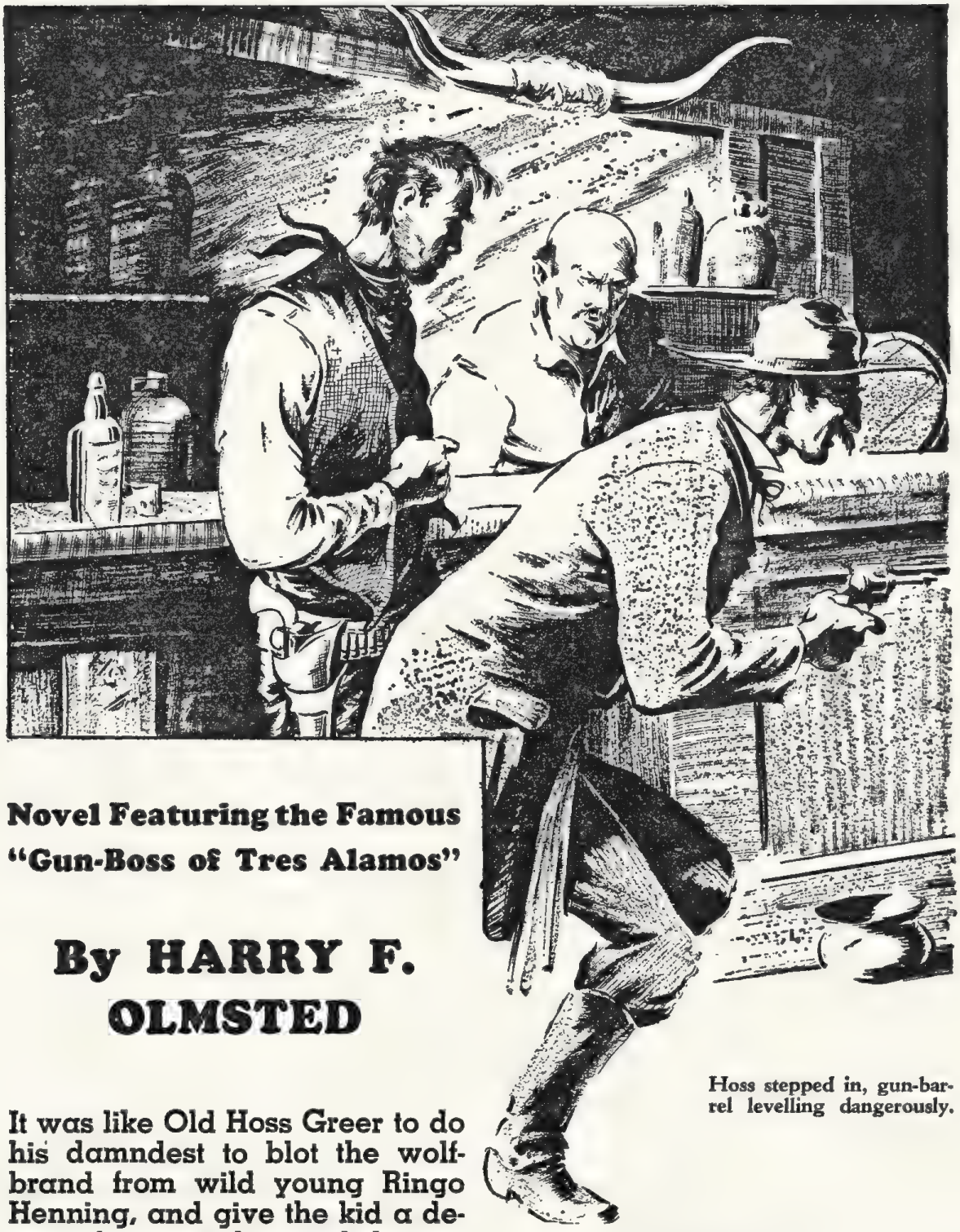
Old Van Oliver's grin was enough of an answer. He said he had a wedding present for them. The mortgage and beef money he had cached as bait to fetch back Slicker Soto.

But Jake Guthrie and his sons said that the money would go into Van Oliver's share of his ranch. Along with the reward money on the dead outlaws.

"And your daddy kep' a-saying', Tug," chuckled old Van, "that you was too danged young fer to be messin' into a gun-ruckus!"

THE END

# ★ ★ HOSS GREER'S



Hoss stepped in, gun-barrel levelling dangerously.

**Novel Featuring the Famous "Gun-Boss of Tres Alamos"**

## By HARRY F. OLMSTED

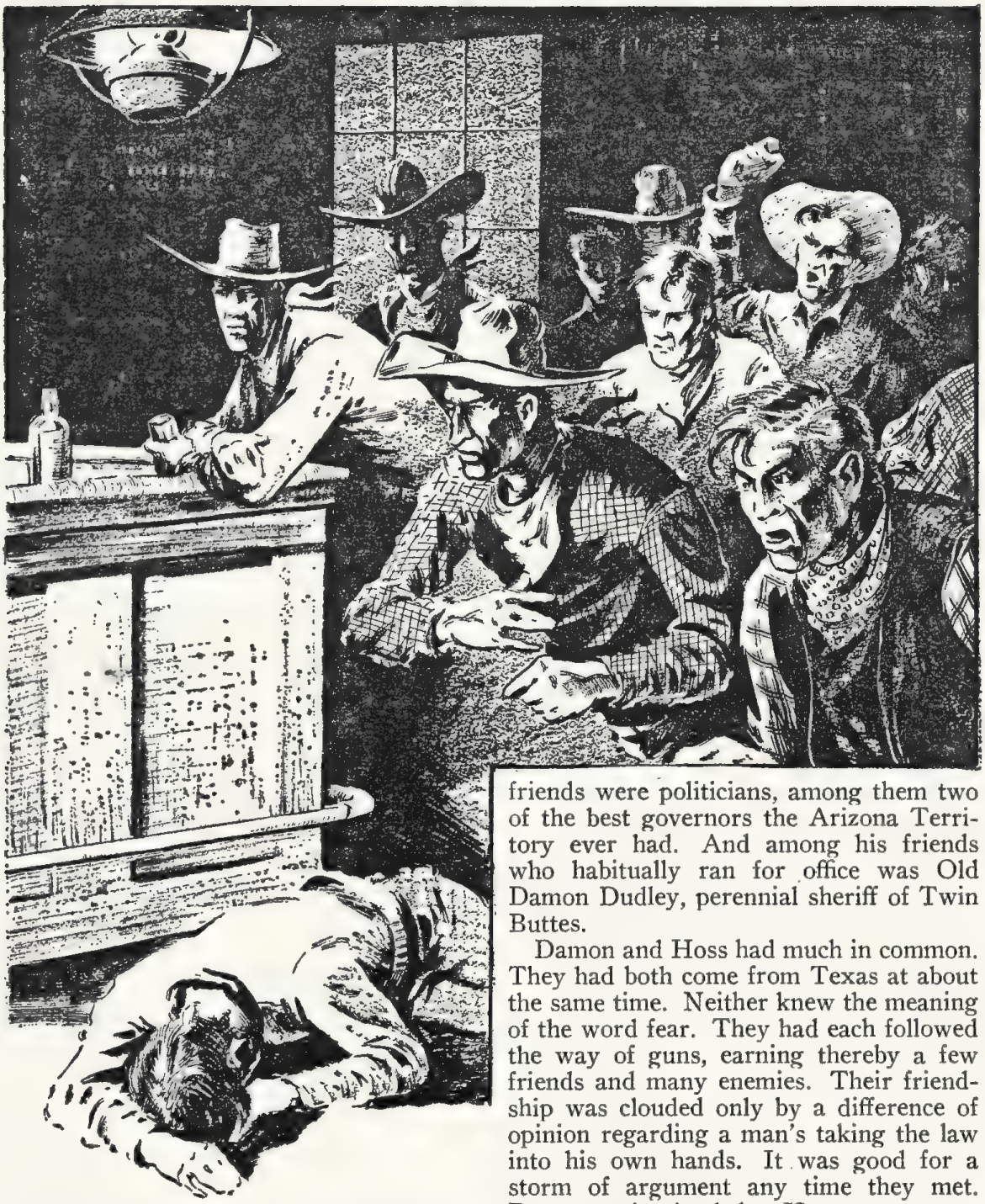
**It was like Old Hoss Greer to do his damndest to blot the wolf-brand from wild young Ringo Henning, and give the kid a decent chance to live with honest men. . . . But the big Twin Buttes combine was set on keeping the kid bad, and were more than willing to argue that point with bushwhack bullets.**

### CHAPTER ONE

**Black Sheep Brand!**

OLD Hoss Greer's pet peeve was politics and those who hitch their wagon to the dim and devious star of vote getting. "Politics," he had been

# PISTOL PROTEGE ★



known to state, under the mellowing influence of a few drinks, "is a disease. Mostly it eats out the good in a man, like dry rot in an apple. Political promises are made only to get votes—an' then be quickly busted. Half the skunk a man smells in this life is let off by some big-chested politician."

Yet, for all that, some of Hoss' best friends were politicians, among them two of the best governors the Arizona Territory ever had. And among his friends who habitually ran for office was Old Damon Dudley, perennial sheriff of Twin Buttes.

Damon and Hoss had much in common. They had both come from Texas at about the same time. Neither knew the meaning of the word fear. They had each followed the way of guns, earning thereby a few friends and many enemies. Their friendship was clouded only by a difference of opinion regarding a man's taking the law into his own hands. It was good for a storm of argument any time they met. Damon maintained that Hoss was a renegade at heart and would surely wind up on the gallows.

"An' I'll get the dirty job of hangin' yuh," he would end up, plaintively.

"For the usual fee," Hoss would invariably retort. "Which explains why you tell the voters how much you love 'em, every two years. You damned ol' hypo-

crite, you ain't got the guts to auger with a man, or smoke it out with him—except behind the protection of that tin badge."

For all their crustiness to one another, no two men would go farther to prove friendship, as both had proved—many times. That's why word of Damon's death hit Hoss like a poleaxe. "Right 'twixt the horns."

With real grief in his heart, Hoss rode for Twin Buttes, rehearsing words of sympathy for Missus Dudley, who had been the Widder Partee when Damon married her, five years before. Hoss hadn't seen much of his old friend since the termination of his bachelordom. The Widder was a teetotaler and she made Damon keep his smelly pipe outside. Hoss' one visit there had been a very stiff affair indeed. He didn't repeat it.

Hoss' well chosen words of consolation got plumb away from him when he entered the Widder's parlor. But there was no embarrassment. She talked both legs right out from under him. She was practical. She was philosophical. She was grateful that Damon had died the death of a gentleman—in bed, with summer pneumonia, instead of in some disgraceful gun brawl. She was leaving in the morning for her old family home in Pennsylvania. As Secretary of the Twin Buttes Improvement Association, she regretted terribly having to miss the meeting tomorrow night. Would Hoss attend and take a strong stand for a new deal. . . .

She went into detail, attacking what she called provincialism, a backward looking attitude toward civic affairs, a failure to rise above the old six-shooter days of a cowboy metropolis. "My dear departed husband," she sighed, "was a very stubborn man. We never argued about these things, Mister Greer, but whatever weight I pulled for reform, he nullified by the old superstitions regarding a town without gun law going to the dogs. Yes, poor dear Damon was very old fashioned."

"But, ma'am," pleaded Hoss. "So am I old fashioned. Damon's convictions an' mine was plumb together on that score. I—"

"Tut, tut," scoffed the grand dame of Twin Buttes society, and reeled out three-quarters of an hour of double-barreled argument to prove his stand erroneous. Until the old cowdog was dizzy and, in order to escape further torment, passed his word to work for a new political, economic and social order in this metropolis of the Tapadero Valley. There were tears in the strong-minded woman's eyes as she wrung the hand of her latest convert and promised to have further arguments for him at the funeral.

That's why Old Hoss kept a goodly part of the vast crowd between himself and the blackly garbed and veiled widow at graveside. And as he listened to the perorations for the departed, his only pang was one of relief that his old friend had escaped five years of hell on earth.

It was a great sendoff they gave Old Damon. Florid, portly Mayor Barney Partee, spoke for half an hour, extolling the virtues of the man who had brought order out of the flamboyant chaos of a gun-ruled cow town. He cited Damon's honesty and the rugged quality of his service to each and every citizen in the valley. He compared him to the great pioneers of history, who sacrifice themselves on the altar of decency and right. Hoss smiled. He had heard Barney campaigning against Damon four years before, damning him as an outmoded blot on the escutcheon of an otherwise proud county.

The Reverend Potipher Compton spoke of Hoss' old friend as being a God-fearing man.

For that, thought Hoss, the Dominie could be excused. Around sky pilots that hard cursing old gun-fighter was always shy and on his best behavior. And as Hoss left the graveyard he was somehow very glad that Damon hadn't been there to see the farce, or to hear the arguments already waxing hot regarding his successor. And from a safe distance, Hoss watched the mayor and committee of townswomen see Amanda Harrison Partee Dudley off on the east-bound stage. When the dust had settled and the four wagon ponies had drawn the coach from sight, a peace seemed to settle over Twin Buttes. The women repaired to their homes. The mayor led the way into the Stirrup Saloon. And Hoss, sensing important judgements to be arrived at there, and being of a curious nature, followed the crowd.

Hoss was turning to the swing doors when, across the muttering of the saloon

patronage, the clash of talk and laughter and the clink of glassware, came a shrill and irate yell: "You're a damned liar, Partee. If Damon Dudley had outlived his usefulness, then you an' yore kind ain't never bin nothin' but a runnin' sore on the earth's face. Sheriff Dudley was my friend an' you keep yore dirty tongue offa his name or I'll jerk it out by the roots!"

★

HOSS stepped quickly into the barroom, where patrons were withdrawing from a space that now held by a big man and a wiry youth. Barney Partee, brother of Damon Dudley's widow's first husband and mayor of Twin Buttes, was white with rage, trembling with restraint and chewing on his down-curving mustache.

The youth who faced him was equally irate, yet more emotionally controlled. He had a gaunt, saddle-leather face, young yet strangely old. A deeply lined face, gashed by a thin-lipped, cynical mouth. Sunken eyes of granite gray peered out from underneath sandy brows, eyes that had looked upon their share of violence, disappointment and injustice. It was plain that this one, with the young body and the old, bitter eyes, had known little kindness or joy.

"Ringo Henning!" The mayor approached him threateningly. "For your own good, I'm telling you something. The man who protected you, who let you get away with every kind of devilment except murder, who denied that the bad streak of the Hennings was certain to crop out in you, is dead. This is a new day for Twin Buttes and Tapadero County. Dunlap's successor will pledge himself to jail you for your first offense and to put you in the penitentiary where you belong."

"Offense," sneered the youth. "Such as tellin' off a skunk-stinkin' politician for slanderin' the name of the best sheriff this county or any other county ever had?"

"Look here, you wild young blackguard!" Partee thrust his square face close to that of the youth, his eyes contracted, his lips furled ragefully. "You're the last of a rotten line. Your dad was hung for murder—"

"Framed!" spat Ringo Henning.

"Your brother was killed when a gang of renegades looted the bank at Santa Rita—"

"He was killed while reclaiming a horse, stole from his corral by them bank robbers."

"A likely story. You're a renegade son of a renegade father and—"

Ringo smashed his fist to the mayor's face, rocking his two hundred pounds backward a half dozen teetering steps.

Old Hoss hollered: "Hey . . . wait!"

Partee issued a blatant roar and charged his frail opponent. But the banked crowd prevented him from breaking through and he made no great struggle—for the fight was already full fledged, and not so one sided as he might have presumed.

Chin lowered to his great chest, Partee charged with flailing fists. To the crouched youth, he must have seemed like some vast natural force, avalanching to destruction everything before it. He gave before that advance, snapping short, jarring punches to the big man's head, bringing him to a stumbling halt.

Squirming away from clutching fingers, Ringo exploded a full swing against Partee's chin. Bleeding at the mouth, the man lunged after him, venting a confident laugh. The youth backed in a fixed circle, peppering the mayor's eyes, his nose and mouth, keeping him endlessly off balance.

The saloon was a madhouse, with a few hollering for the man but most men roaring encouragement to the under dog. Hoss found himself strangely excited, elbowing his way to the inside circle. A man beside him stuck out his foot to trip Ringo. Hoss' swinging gun barrel smashed him to the floor. Nobody tried that again.

Ringo kept dishing out small but continuous punishment as he retreated. His only hope, Hoss believed, was to batter down this challenge to his right to be somebody. His only chance was to peck away at his burly adversary, dull his wits and finally put him down for good. That's what Hoss bellowed to his champion, his advice lost in the pandemonium. But already the youth, his agile mind figuring out each move like a chess player, was succeeding.

Now Partee rushed him. Ringo swerved. Partee rushed past and the youth staggered him with a savage blow

to the kidney. Slavering like a ravening beast, sensing a disastrous defeat, Partee came around, his head wobbling, his sight clouding, his chest heaving for breath. "Stand and fight!" he gasped. "What is this; a running match—"

Ringo smashed the words back into his teeth, danced away from Partee's swing. The mayor veered with him, catching him with a glancing blow that slammed him to the floor. Hoss got ready to take a hand as the big man reached down and encircled the youth's neck with his powerful fingers. But, while stunned, Ringo was far from finished. Rebounding with the quick response of youth, he jabbed his thumbs into Partee's eyes and drove his boots like pistons into the man's middle. Partee dropped to his back, like a sack of oats, rolled to his face and lay still.

Ringo bounced up, eyes sweeping the halfmoon of men who had grown strangely silent. He was breathing hard and his eyes were full of dull, smouldering fire. "Anybody else wanta take it up from there?"

"Nobody else better even play with the idea," said Hoss darkly.

"Grab him!" shouted a gray-haired man in a merchant's apron. "No man can set aside law an' order like this young hellion. Grab him and I'll swear out the complaint. Grab him, you that are nearest to him—"

And when several men seemed intent upon doing just that. Hoss stepped out, his gun-barrel levelling dangerously. "Nobody's grabbin' this boy now, gents. Mebby tomorrow. Mebby not at all. All right, son, le's travel."

Ringo nodded, backed out, Hoss following. The menace of the cowman's carelessly swung gun discouraged dissention.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Reform Sheriff

MAKING no move toward his horse, Ringo dawdled until Hoss caught him. Falling into step, as if in spoken accord, they moved along the walk. Hoss' admiration was stirred by this youth's fearless independence, his battling spirit and lack of justified bitterness. At the lower edge of town, they turned up a flat slope to the mesa graveyard, pausing before the freshly mounded grave of Damon Dudley.

"My friend too," murmured Hoss simply.

"I figgered so. Are you mebbyso Hoss Greer?"

"The same."

"The gent he could never agree with yet was always good friends with, eh?"

"Damon's bark was worse than his bite, son."

"So he said about you, Hoss. Say, how about me an' you fixin' a stone for him. Not a polished one, tooled with clap-trap, but a big granite boulder that's rough an' clean an' friendly—like Damon."

"Good idea, Ringo." Hoss smiled, recalling other gravesides. "When I was yore age, son, losin' a friend hit me hard. Now—well, rain falls an' seeds sprout. Sun warms the earth an' it's summer. Things dry up, leaves fall an' cold nights fetch winter. Men are borned, live their spans an' die. How you an' I feel, Ringo, makes no difference. Nature's rutted an' her patterns don't change. That's why I'm glad Damon has escaped that woman."

"Better sermon than the sky-pilot's," said Ringo. "Let's wander back."

They moved off through the soft dusk. Hoss said: "More advice, son. While folks stew in petty gravy, you keep clear. I admire all you said an' done, but if you return an' get jugged, that's as bad as lettin' a pony kick you twice in the same place. Go home an' lie doggo till the smoke settles. People forget quick."

Ringo nodded grimly, acknowledging the wisdom without enthusiasm. At a rack he mounted. "Come see me, Hoss," he invited, and spurred away, straight and brave and untamed in the saddle. The dusk swallowed him and Hoss breathed easier.

"Renegade," he scoffed. "Wolf whelp. Like hell! He's a sound apple, but I've seen plenty like him shook off the tree before they was half ripe."

The meeting of the County Commissioners, to appoint Damon's successor, was star chamber. Hoss was one of many milling about the stone court-house, hoping for admittance. Three got in. Barney Partee, mayor and town political boss;

cadaverous Porter McFee, whose nod could make or break a candidate for county office; and Potipher Compton—hell-and-damnation preacher and second behind the omnipresent Amanda Harrison Partee Dudley in the Civic Reform League. These three emerged smiling, after an hour and a half. Answering public clamor, McFee shouted:

"Gentlemen—please. It's Gaddis Jackling for the unexpired term. Read the details in tomorrow afternoon's Guardian-Citizen."

Cheers and catcalls. A man near Hoss groaned. "Cripes. With a hundred good men available, they would pick Gad."

"Bad, eh?" prompted Hoss.

"Terrible. Gad's coroner and undertaker—a former Phoenix schoolma'am up here for his asthma. Slick dresser. Favorite of all the wimmen. Butter won't melt in his mouth. Reform! I'll tell a man. Ol' Damon's turning in his grave."

Next morning, Hoss was picking his teeth before the American Kitchen when Gad Jackling opened his office, and thus became his first order of business. Stepping into the musty cubby hung with placards and mementos of Damon's brave day, Hoss roused the solemn, half-bewildered lawman. "Mornin', Sheriff. Understand you want to see me."

Jackling eyed him, puzzlement furrowing his brow. He dropped into Damon's swivel chair, laced his fingers, studied and then shook his head. "I—I don't re—"

"Greer. Hoss Greer."

"I'm sorry. I guess you're thinking of my predecessor, Damon—"

"I'm the gent who helped Ringo Henning get away last night."

"Oh!" Jackling bit his lip. "No, I don't care to see you, Mister Greer. But if you're a friend of young Henning's, you'll want to know that I take office with no other committment than to hunt that rascal down and jail him."

"Thanks. I confess, Sheriff, that I sympathize with any man biddin' for the chance to live down his kin-folks. What's the charge?"

"Assault and battery; disturbing the peace and a rustling charge that Damon never pressed. He was too friendly with the lad, spoiled him by being too easy."

"Maybe Damon was right."

"I believe Damon smelled trouble. He talked guns and the hard approach to law enforcement—but underneath I think he feared Ringo Henning."

"Damon didn't fear the Devil and his imps, Sheriff. "Ringo is like him. Twin Buttes will be watching you critical in this, judging you. Is your gun hand steady?"

Jackling snorted. "The day of guns is past, just as Damon's day is done. I am the instrument of moral reform, Mister Greer. When I go after Ringo Henning, I'll be armed with the majesty of the law."

"You mean wearing no gun; taking no armed posse?"

"Totally avoiding the ancient way, sir. No more guns or posses in Tapadero County. We'll model for other communities, cowing the lawless with moral force."

"Film-flam," barked Hoss. "I wish you luck, Jackling—you'll need it." He walked out and went down to pay his hotel bill. The hotel man started when Hoss asked the location of the Henning place which, he understood, was for sale.

"For sale? No. Title to that three-

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

NEW SCIENTIFIC 2-WAY TREATMENT WITH **QUINSANA** POWDER -ON FEET AND IN SHOES – IS PRODUCING AMAZING RESULTS. IN TESTS ON THOUSANDS OF PERSONS, PRACTICALLY ALL CASES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT CLEARED UP IN A SHORT TIME.

twenty is in Pike and Link Henning, both deceased and intestate. Once the lawyers establish the lack of heirs, the county will acquire it. You see, I know all about that 'cause my boy's Jim Blunt—Title Security Company. Go see him for anything regarding lands, titles, corners, taxes, etcetry. He won't rob you either."

"I'll look him up," promised Hoss. "But about the Hennings—ain't Ringo the heir? Is there any reason he shouldn't be?"

The man blinked, lowered his voice. "Just between us, Ringo's athwart the law. They'll put him away and acquire the property, you can be sure of that. They'll sell it at auction and somebody will buy a spring that gushes out like a river."

"I aim to have that somebody me," said Hoss.

The man shook his head. "Don't you think of it, Mister Greer. That's friendly advice. A prominent official here has his heart set on it. No, I wouldn't want to be quoted on his name. I've talked too much already. You forget the Henning place."

It was well meant advice that served only to loose forces in Hoss that meant hell for somebody. He went at once for his pony, milked the hostler for directions and rode out of town.

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THE Henning place sat against the hills, the flat in front overrun by spring waters, tules, rushes, water grass and willows. Drainage and channeling, Hoss decided, could make this a fine sub-irrigated alfalfa field. The place was in sad need of repair, roofs sagging, corrals gaping and a haystack eaten into strange mushroom shape by fence breaking stock. Receiving no answer to his knock, Hoss walked into the house, quite neat and clean for the quarters of a lone kid.

With the need to kill time until Ringo's return, Hoss rigged up one of the youth's fishpoles, dug a few worms and dawdled the day away catching catfish. He was frying them when Ringo came home.

"Cripes, Mister Greer," the youngster flushed. "If I'd thought you meant it, I'd uh mucked out the cabin before you came."

"Gotta plan that stone, don't we, son? Set an' tie into them cats. Plumb nice fishin', which I've bin lookin' for a place like this for years. Place where I can get plumb away from everything except hungry catfish. How much you want for this layout, son?"

Ringo seemed pleased. "Never mind that. You come out here anytime you want an' fish your head off. Hell, Hoss, I like company. An' I rise to state you cook a fish a heap better'n I can."

"I'm dead serious, Ringo," protested Hoss. "I'd like to buy. How much?"

The youth sobered. "All I've done," he said, "is to turn down offers to sell, since Pop an' Link cashed in their chips. Besides, what would I do if I sold it?"

"Invest the money in cattle," snapped Hoss, "an' th'ow 'em onto my grass an' earn good money while you build a herd. I can point out a lot slower way of gettin' ahead, son."

"I'll admit I ain't done much," said Ringo gloomily. "They won't give me a chance. I had a few cattle here, but not no more. I know who got 'em."

"Who?"

"I paid off part of the debt yesterday."

"Partee?"

"Partee's Rafter Cross Bar." He pointed. "Just across the high ridge. I been on top all day, watchin' to see 'em come boilin' over to take pay for my beatin' up their boss."

It was not a surprise. From what the proud father of the title man had said, it had pointed to Partee being the one who wanted the Henning place. On a range subject to intermittent drouth, a spring like Ringo's was priceless. Ringo, Hoss had decided, was in deadly danger whether he knew it or not. Perhaps from the same insidious interests that had destroyed his kinsmen.

"Maybe they won't hit at you that way, Ringo," the cowman suggested. "The new sheriff told me he was riding out to arrest you for assault, disturbing the peace an' an old rustling charge."

"New sheriff?" Ringo's astonishment was mixed with quick anger. "Who'd they hang the badge on?"

"Gad Jackling."

"Him? *Humph.* If he comes after me, I'll make him shuck his pants an' walk back home in his drawers."

"That's what they want you to do.

Anything so they can kill you or put you away. Then Partee will get your outfit. Listen!"

Hoss kicked back his chair, darted to a window. Down yonder where the road skirted the water meadow, a lone rider came leisurely on, his pony kicking little spurts of dust. "It's Jackling now," snapped Hoss. "You get outa the house an' lie doggo. I'll handle him. No, don't auger—git. You brash young fool, I've had ten times your experience. I'm trying to help you."

His fervency awed the younger man; he turned and went out the back. Hoss hurriedly scrubbed the dishes Ringo had eaten from and had them back in the cupboard when the sheriff hailed the house, dismounted and came to the door.

"You, eh?" he said, gloomily. "You've probably warned him, sent him packing into the hills he knows like a book. I was a fool to have talked, wouldn't have if I'd even suspected he was as bad as he is. Where is he?"

"Honestly, Sheriff I wouldn't know. What's made you think he's worse than you believed?"

"What he and other toughs like him did in Twin Buttes today, at noon. Don't tell me that you're innocent of his movements, Greer."

"You wouldn't believe the truth if you heard it," rapped Hoss. "What's he charged with now?"

"Murder and robbery! They killed Joe McBride—the bank teller, and got away with two thousand dollars. Greer, I've got to search the house?"

"I wouldn't do that, Sheriff," said Hoss, feeling cold currents of doubt run along his spine. "If he killed the teller, what makes you think he won't kill you, if you trap him inside?"

It stopped the lawman cold. Even his stubbornness failed him. He licked his lips and stood fiddle-footing and without comfort. Finally, forced with the need to make a move, he said: "Then he is inside?"

"He's not in there, Sheriff. Go in and have a look."

"Thanks, no. I'll take your word for it. Tell Ringo to come in and give himself up. The Commissioners are offering a thousand dollar reward for him—dead." He climbed onto his horse, reined him about. Hoss called after him.

"Looks like the ancient ways has come back with a bang, eh, Sheriff?"

Jackling ignored the taunt. Hoss watched him ride away in silent, solemn dignity, starting as the man reared backward, lifted in the stirrups and toppled. His pony quit the trail, snorting, trembling. Gun echoes shook the evening calm.

Arms hanging, Hoss watched it with a calm, aloof cruelty. For seconds, he stood frozen, expecting the shock of a bullet. When it didn't come, he turned, as Ringo came darting out from under the haystack, slashing the hillside with futile, murderous gunfire. Gun empty, the youth wheeled to see Hoss approaching him, lowering, formidable, puzzlement laying wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Hoss said:

"I know how they've crowded you, son, an' don't condemn yore anger. But why play right into the noose somebody's got already swingin' for you?"

## CHAPTER THREE

### Hoss Stacks the Deck

RINGO seemed astonished. "You, the great Hoss Greer, was fooled? Just like that tenderfoot sheriff if he'd had time to be fooled. The shot come from up yonder an' it's rattler dangerous to go huntin' the bushwhacker."

Hoss took his smoking gun—a .44 Colt's Army that couldn't possibly have carried. Retaining the weapon, as if lacking faith, Hoss turned to the haystack, vainly combing chaff and litter for a hidden rifle. Ringo watched, face stony, lips compressed, awaiting Hoss' judgment. Finally, with biting scorn: "Now that he's had time to get away, le's go up an' look at the sign."

Hoss agreed, and thy climbed the darkening hill. Now the damp mold showed marks of a spike heel. They followed upward to a rift in the brush, where hoof marks and cigarette butts told their story. Hoss returned the gun, showing no contrition.

"I wasn't doubting you, son. I had to test yore temper, under lash. You'll do to ride with. Now le's git that bushwhacker."

Ahorse, they followed the trail to the

ridgeback and down to Sawmill Flats, where night hid the sign in the dust of a wagon road. "This trace leads to Rafter Cross Bar," said Ringo. "You wanta go there?"

"That's useless, son. Harm's done an' layin' on yore doorstep, sorta."

Ringo gulped. "I know. Heard Jackling's talk. I'm tarred with gallows stuff."

"Anyway, you know the stakes, Kid. Who you guess robbed the bank?"

"I never guess, Hoss. Gimme two days an' I'll find out."

"Big order, ain't it?"

"Not for me. Since I could toddle, I've learned to read the secrets on the ground. Little things, unnoticed by most, was matters of life an' death to me. Savvy?"

Hoss beamed on this young stalwart. "Good. Take two days. Avoid yore cabin an' watch yore back. I gotta feel around some. See you tomorrow night—here."

"Good. I'll be here. Luck, Hoss."

"Luck to you, Kid." Hoss rode back to the Henning Place, where Jackling lay stiffening, his pony standing patiently near by. Hoss tied the body across the saddle and led the animal across the mountain to Sawmill Flats, thence by road to a bench from which a lone light pointed the Rafter Cross Bar. Tying the animals here, Hoss shouldered the corpse and felt his way down to the ranch.

It was tough, toting that burden and easing past the corrals to where the buildings were. Windows were dark save for one in the house, where men drank and played cards noisily. Hoss rolled Jackling's body under the fence of the breaking pen, placed him with his back to the snubbing post, coat outside. Buttoning the coat, he let the dead man slump to his knees. Tying the wrists with hogging string and hitching it around the neck, he got the effect he wanted. Jackling looked like a man praying. Satisfied, the cowman returned to the ponies, loosed Jackling's animal and took the road past the Rafter Cross Bar and into the gap splitting the hills.

Emerging into Tapadero Valley again, Hoss spotted the distant lights of Twin Buttes. His pony, free-bitted, quickened the pace, its hoof echoes seeming to grow strangely louder. A mot of scrub pine enveloped Hoss and, as he broke into the clear again, his error was apparent. He wheeled off the road, faced by the jagged silhouettes of riders. A challenge:

"Lift, feller, or we'll blast yuh. Call yore brand."

Hoss elevated, backing his pony to a bank so he had them before him. "My bronc don't like yore scent, gents," he said. "So keep distance between us. I'm Hoss Greer an' my gun's in holster. Keep yores there also."

His "hands-up" was a delusion. Lulled by the attitude, men had called upon treachery and died, never knowing Hoss could drop a coin from one ear, draw and put two fatal bullets into a man-size target at twenty paces, before the coin hit dirt. But there were five targets here and Hoss stood his hand. Now Partee spoke.

"Greer, eh? Get a fire going boys." And when flame licked up in a pile of twigs and leaves, Hoss looked into the hostile eyes of Twin Buttes' mayor, heard his cold snarl of fury. "It's him, all right. The feller who got Henning away after I'd flopped to the floor an' had baited the trap for him."

A rider snickered. Another said: "If he's Ringo's friend, what we waitin' for? Le's hang him!" He was unbuckling his rope when Partee snorted.

"You talk too much, Lin. Greer's one of the swiftest, or was. Dab a rope on him and he'll kill you quick." He changed tone. "What you doin' here, Greer? You got a Ranger's badge under your shirt?"

Hoss laughed. "Thanks, Partee. Good boys, the Rangers, who don't travel for fun? What you been up to that you're fearin' the comin' of the Rangers?"

"Gunfighters hidin' behind badges," sneered Partee. "Makin' trouble if they can't find enough. Don't get nosey, Greer. You may have bin good once, but not as good as the lies they tell about you. Gunswift ebbs after fifty, which you'll never see again."

"Right," chuckled Hoss. "I'd like to auger, boys, but I'm lost an' I gotta find Ringo Henning's place. Can you direct me?"

"Ringo, eh? Play with that renegade and you'll suffer. What's your game?"

"I'd like to buy his place."

" 'Tain't for sale."

"Ringo didn't talk thataway."

"He'd lie to rook you. 'Tain't his say. Title rests in the county."

"My lawyers will handle that," said Hoss. "How'll I find the place?"

"Why waste time?" demanded sullen Lin. "Shoot an' dump him. He's beggin'."

"Shut up!" rapped Partee. Then he said to Hoss, "Don't be a goat an' butt in here. Clear out. Be wise and don't let another sun catch you here. Come on, boys."

Hoss held silent, watching them spur their ponies into violent action and roar away into the gap. Hoss took a deep breath and expelled it. "There," he said, chuckling dryly, "is one prudent man. And smart, too. Partee, that's one time I was glad to see you. If you hadn't been along, blood would have flowed—mine among it."

★

NEXT morning, at a seemly hour, Hoss was announced and admitted to the inner sanctum of the real political power of Tapadero County. On the outer window gold letters had identified the place as the office of

PORTER McFEE

Attorney-at-Law

Gaunt and taciturn, the lawyer sat behind a polished desk, staring at Hoss through steel-rimmed glasses. He did not offer to rise or to shake hands. His glance was cold and dead, utterly nerveless. His voice, when it came, was dry as footsteps in dead leaves. "Sit down, Mister Greer. What brings you to me?"

Hoss eased himself into an arm chair, trying to pierce the man's unshakable calm. The man's features were pinched, parsimonious. He looked less like a jury pleader than a hypocritical church deacon, which he was. What left Hoss in doubt was what lay hidden behind his bushy black brows. He had the power here; Hoss had verified that from a half dozen sources. How was he using it? To see that worthy, efficient men served Tapadero County? Or would he pronounce a death judgment on a man to serve his own selfish ends?

"You're the bank lawyer," said Hoss. "How much was lost in that robbery?"

"If I knew, Greer, why should I tell you?"

"I'm on a vacation, McFee. It will be a lot of fun running down the gents that have that money. But unless I know the amount, how can I know I've got 'em all."

"You know where some of the money is?" The lawyer looked astonished.

"That's right."

"Who has it?"

"You'll know that when I've tangled with the guilty parties."

*"Hm'mm!"* McFee rasped his palms together. "A good citizen would lay the information before the authorities, the sheriff."

"Gad Jackling?" Hoss laughed scornfully. "I'm told he's out after them bank robbers now. Without so much as a cap pistol. How long you think he'll last with men gone bronc?"

McFee winced. "I'm inclined to agree with you, Greer. But I gave my word to the widow of our late sheriff, to give morality and decency and the appeal to reason a fair chance. How long do you give him?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"In other words, the office should be vacant along about four o'clock tonight, is that it?"

"You're an optimist, McFee."

For a moment they stared at one another. The lawyer bit the end off a cigar, rolled it thoughtfully between his lips as he watched Hoss make a cigarette. From the street came a low, prolonged murmur that grew into an alarmed roar. McFee started up. "What is that?"

Hoss sat still. He thought he knew what it was and expectation rioted in his veins. Boot heels beat against the walk and a door smashed open. A voice roared: "McFee. McFee! Get out of my way, feller." The violently swung panel half hid Hoss as Mayor Barney Partee burst in. "Porter, it's Gad. He's dead. Shot to death by that skunk, Ringo Henning. Gad told me he was calling at the Henning place and that whether or not he arrested that young hellion, he'd come over to the ranch. When he didn't show up, we rode over. There lay poor Gad—right where—"

The mayor cut off his speech, sensing another behind him. He whirled and Hoss saw fear shudder across his eyeballs. "You—Greer," he said, shakily. "I didn't know you were here."

"Go right ahead, Partee."

"No," countermanded the lawyer. "You go take care of things, Barney. I'll see you when I've finished my business with this gentleman. Close the door as you go out."

Partee looked from one to the other, then ducked out. Excitement was rising on the street, but it seemed to have left the lawyer cold. A chill smile rode his wide lips. "I've always been interested in the science of clairvoyance, Greer. Perhaps you can take me as a pupil, one day. Now then, why did you come to me?"

"I need your help to further my candidacy?"

"Candidacy? For what office?" Partee's bulging eyes studied Hoss.

"Sheriff."

"*Hm'mm.* You're a cool one, Greer. But we know nothing about you."

"You soon will, McFee." And again making it look like the genius of a seer, the clerk in the outer office knocked and stuck his head in.

"Telegram, Mister McFee."

The lawyer took the missive, read it and read it again. His eyes had taken on a sheen when he looked at Hoss. "It's from the governor," he said, with undisguised admiration. "He gives you the kind of send-off that can't be bought for money. I think I can promise to swing my influence, such as it is, to support you. As I understand it, you feel sure you know where to go to apprehend the bank robbers?"

"About as sure," grinned Hoss, "as I was that the governor's wire would reach here at the right moment. I didn't muff that one, McFee."

"As sheriff," said the politician, "what would your first step be?"

"I'll appoint Ringo Henning as my deputy."

McFee whistled. "Whee-ew! You believe in making folks sit up and take notice, don't you?" He stroked his lank chin. "Then what?"

"I'll clean up the gang that looted the bank, or get cleaned up."

"According to the governor, Greer, I'll be wise to bet on you. After you get that job finished, you can call your own shots. But curiosity must be satisfied. You are a big figure in the cattle business. How can you afford to serve us as sheriff?"

"Can't. Don't intend to. I aim to clean up a few blots on a man's name, resign the job in his favor, buy a drink for the boys an' go about my business. Do I need to tell you who the logical successor to Old Damon should be? An' you must be interested, 'cause I'm told Damon never could have had the votes except for you."

The lawyer looked pleased. "Slightly exaggerated, Greer, but I own to a very affectionate regard for that hard-shelled old reprobate. No, you needn't name the party. I'm inclined to the belief the idea may be good for Tapadero County. I'm convinced that there was a breakdown of ethics in the demise of two rugged characters who sinned in acquiring the best spring in this region. To the extent of your suggestion we can make partial restitution. The Commissioners will meet at the Town Hall at eight tonight. Be there."

Hoss nodded and went out, flashing a grin he didn't feel. So far he had played winning politics. But he had based it all on a hunch. What if he failed to make good his bluff?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Sheriff Maker

THE seething crowd was dispersing from before the undertaking parlor, where Gad Jackling lay on one of his own slabs. Already the saloons were busy, as men drank and talked it over. Circulating among the excited groups were men who openly arraigned Ringo Henning, preached the doctrine of a quick trial in the court of Judge Lynch, once they had Ringo under the gun. Hoss fixed the faces of several of these in his mind and, tiring of the magpie chattering, moved far down the street to a small saloon where the whiskey couldn't be worse and elbow room was to be had.

Here, buying a cigar and a glass of bourbon, he sat at a rear table, laid his worn-butted .45 before him and peered expectantly through a cloud of smoke at

the front door. He hadn't long to wait. Mayor Barney Partee came in, spotted him and moved toward him with affected dignity. Behind him strode a horse of a man, with great hulking shoulders, bulging thighs and a jaw like a beartrap. On his thick chest gleamed the shiny badge of town law.

With the air of men who have a purpose, they came to Hoss' table, pulled out chairs and sat down. Hoss awaited their pleasure, an ironic grin on his face. His reputation, he knew, had gone before him, and he had not hid it under a bushel while in Twin Buttes. Men who acquired reputations like his were sure to have it challenged, as it had been challenged many times before. He wondered if this was another test.

Hoss said: "You gents come to make talk, or something easier to answer?"

"You're a smart one, Greer," said Partee. "Too smart to play me for a dumb skull. I've got the goods on you. We know now why you were in the Gap last night, don't we?"

"Speak for yourself, Partee. You know why I was in the Gap; is that what you're trying to say? All right, you know. Let me in on it, feller. Why?"

"I suppose you thought it funny to fetch Jackling's body to my corral and hang it up like you did. Why didn't you let it lay where Ringo dropped it?"

A sudden grin splashed across Hoss' gray eyes. Until now, he could only surmise the guilt of the Rafter Cross Bar. There was nothing morbid in Hoss. He hadn't carried that corpse across the mountain just for a joke. With it he had baited a trap and as he had hoped, Partee had snapped at it. Only Hoss, Ringo and the killer and his mates could know where Gad Jackling had fallen. Hoss said:

"When the new sheriff is appointed, Partee, are you game to tell him you lied when you reported finding Jackling in Ringo's front yard? Are you game to sic him onto me, just because you met me in the Gap?"

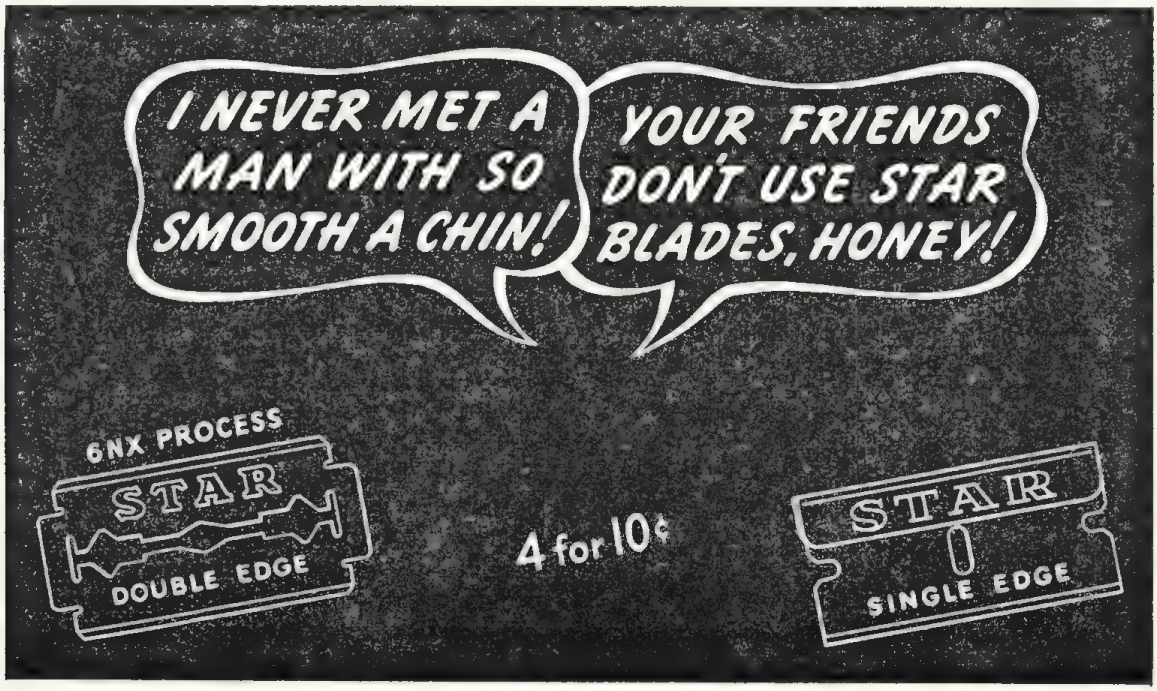
Partee blinked. "Sure. Why not? Here's Bull Bartlett, the town marshal. He'll be the next sheriff. He and I understand each other perfectly, don't we, Bull?"

The giant's tiny, shoe-button eyes warmed; his head jerked up and down and in a cavernous voice he said: "You said it, Barney. Yep, sure do."

Hoss' glance whipped this dull-witted, oxlike gunman with an abrupt, cool interest. "Throwing over the reform ideas of morality, decency an' majesty of the law, eh Partee? That's the only sensible thing I've heard out of you yet."

Partee scowled. "Ridicule won't solve your problem, Greer."

"There's a place for ridicule. Never



play the other man's game, if you can avoid it."

"You can't, Greer. You've got till tonight to get out of the county. If you stay, Bull will jail you on a felony charge, supported by a half dozen unimpeachable witnesses. I'll see you sent up, Greer, or maybe hung. Is your stake here worth a cost like that."

"No," said Hoss, only he didn't mean it the way the mayor thought he did. The cost was too high all right, if it had to be paid. Hoss doubted that. Partee smiled and rose.

"I'm glad you see it my way, Greer. Just fade out of the picture and keep your mouth shut and not a breath of this county's scandals will touch you. Come on, Bull."

Trailing like a great, shuffling mastiff, Bartlett followed the mayor from the saloon. Hoss gulped his drink, sloshed it around in his mouth as if to eradicate a bad taste and spat it onto the floor. Then he ground down on the cigar and raised a great smoke. Looking ahead, it seemed an age until eight o'clock. And the cowman had no patience for waiting. . . .

With dry-tongued Porter McFee wielding the power, the County Commissioners sifted eight candidates down to two. Hoss Greer and Bull Bartlett. The vote was four to one for Hoss, and he was sheriff. The one dissenting vote was the Twin Buttes member of the Commission, committing political suicide in revealing loyalty to Partee and not to McFee. He got to his feet, sneering.

"I move," he said, "that Sheriff Greer be committed by this Board to run down, capture and bring in Ringo Henning for trial on a murder charge." It was seconded and passed unanimously. Hoss rose to accept the trust.

"I'll run him down and I'll bring him in," he said, his formal tone shading off to a faint echo of kindliness. "But when I get him here, you gentlemen will be the last to demand his trial. He's be acting as my deputy. And when I resign, he'll be the sheriff—one the years will build into a worthy successor to the great Damon Dudley."

It raised a furor of protest and argument. A motion was put to discarge him forthwith. It lost, thanks to pressure from McFee. Asked to retract his statements, Hoss refused, pleading only for their patience. The tempest subsided and the meeting was adjourned. Outside, McFee congratulated Hoss and bade him good night. Hoss continued down the street. Near the stable he was confronted by Partee, blowing hard from his run to intercept Hoss by way of the back alley.

Short, rough gusts of breath came from the panting mayor and his eyes flashed bitter fury at Hoss. "Your word ain't worth a damn," he exploded. "I was a fool to believe it was. But I still have strong trump cards. "

"Play 'em like you had 'em, Partee."

"You still think young Henning's innocent?"

"I consider the source of the attacks on him," said Hoss grimly. "Use yore own judgment."

"How far would you go to save him?"

"Save him? What you mean?"

"How far would you go for the boy?"

"All the way, Partee." Hoss' smile was an unbeautiful grimace. "Why?"

"This," said the mayor, and fished out a paper from his pocket. "This was handed me, just as I come out of the hall, yonder. Read it."

Hoss took the missive, unfolded it and thumbed a match. In a crudely pencilled scrawl, he read:

> Dear Hoss—
> They got me. Don't make no fool effort to get me loose or they'll cut my throat. My only chance is for you to get out of the county. Once you're gone, I can maybe deal myself out of a cold deck game. If I make it, I will be after that job you promised.
> Ringo.

Though he didn't know the youth's writing, Hoss sensed the authenticity of the plea. Only Ringo would know about the job offer. Slowly, the cowman tore the paper into shreds, tossed them away. His shoulders sagged and all the starch seemed to leave his tough, whang-leather frame.

"Looks like it's my move," he said, mournfully. "You win. I'll vamoose."

Partee's laugh was a scornful taunt as Hoss shuffled dejectedly into the stable to get his horse. The mayor was still there when he rode out. As Hoss rode past him, the man sang out: "Play it straight,

Greer. The feller said they'd hold Ringo long enough to make damn sure you didn't pull no treachery. So long."

Hoss lifted his hand and spurred westward. Passing the west borders of the town, he swerved to the south, circled the outlying environs at a respectable distance and wound up riding the spurs toward the gap. Now he was playing his hunch out to its logical finish. If he had guessed wrong, Lord help Ringo. Hoss shuddered, thinking of the pressure they had put on that gritty youngster, to get him to pen such a note

★

IN THE rambling mud ranch house, at the Rafter Cross Bar, four men sat playing poker Two more, their faces morose with the chagrin of men who have lost their taws on the flip of a card, looked on, eyeballing the play. The room was full of cigarette smoke, the fumes of cheap whiskey and the tension of hard, all-out poker play, catch-as-catch-can and the devil take the one with the more transparent tricks.

"Match your ten," rapped Tol Henline, tossing in two folding bills, "an' raise you thirty. Cost you forty, Strang."

Strang Ijams splashed a drink, took a quick undercover peek at his cards and called. Arch Truett on his left met the bet and raised fifty dollars. Ijams swore and smashed his hand to the board, pulling out with scorched tail feathers and a thin pile of bills.

Casey Lanark tossed in his cards: "Too rich for my blood, gents. I hope it's honest poker."

"What you mean by that?" Tol Henline's high-boned face went chill.

"Look!" said Lanark, reaching for the bottle and suddenly pausing to point at a window. "For cripes sake, is it breakin' dawn a'ready?"

Truett said: "Holy cow!" and darted to the window. "Fire, by hell! The hull shebang's afire. An' me with a two-hundred-dollar horse an' new hundred-dollar rig in the barn. Come on!"

He led the way, the game forgotten. The virus of excitement gripped the others and they followed, running. They darted out back, into the yard where flame and smoke boiled from barn, bunkhouse and saddle shed, not to mention a fat haystack. Sky reaching columns of sparks shot up.

Recklessly the six raced into the smoke-gorged barn, reappearing in a few minutes with their terrified mounts. Then they turned back for their saddles and gear.

The instant those five popped into the burning barn, Old Hoss Greer stirred from his covert under the windmill tower. darted across the yard and entered the house. As he had suspected, cartridge belts and holstered weapons hung over the backs of the four chairs at the poker table. These he hung over his arm. He turned the lamp low. Crossing the room to the left hand one of two doors, he called cautiously:

"Ringo."

"Hoss!" came the muffled answer beyond the panel.

Wary as a wolf, recalling other like circumstances, Hoss plunged inside. But there was no guard posted over the prisoner who lay trussed like a market shoat on the bed. Hoss' knife flashed. Ringo was free.

"Le's take to 'em," he rasped. "I've got a lot to pay these coyotes for, Hoss." He touched his bruised face gingerly. "I played the fool an' they dabbed a loop onto me. Then beat me up when I couldn't fight back. You know what they told me? That Partee framed my dad onto the gallows. An' that he murdered my brother Link an' dropped his body behind the bank they robbed, at Santa Rita."

"Must uh bin damned sure you wouldn't talk," growled Hoss.

"Plenty. They was only waitin' for Partee to start the fun of doin' me to death in some drunk Injun way. They'd figgered to frame me into the pen, but you bein' around here had 'em scairt there might be a slip-up. Sa-a-ay, what's this? You the sheriff?"

"You guessed it, son." Hoss took another badge from his pocket, pinned it on Ringo. "From here out, you're my deputy. The law's a funny thing, son. When a man administers it, he's gotta put aside all his personal likes an' dislikes. I can't think of better fun that to call these buzzards' hands an' saw 'em apart with six-shooter lead. But the law says they've got the right to prove their innocence."

"How can they?" argued Ringo. "That foldin' money they're gamblin' with out yonder come from the Twin Buttes Bank. They bragged about it."

"Knowed it," grunted Hoss. "I saw the original bank wrappers on some that ain't bin opened yet. Listen! Yep, here they come. Now you stay right here, Ringo. Never know what will happen with wild ones like this. If they get a break an' turn the drop, they won't expect trouble from this angle. That'll be your cue."

Hoss stepped out, crossed the dimly lighted room and flattened against the wall. Tol Henline led the way in, cursing the fire and cursing the low-born son who started it. Hoss Greer's name was on his lips, blasphemously. He halted his tirade to order Casey Lanark to get the oil can and fill the lamp, which seemed to be flickering out. Then he and the five who had followed him fell silent. They were staring at the chair around the poker table.

"Boys," said Lanark. "We're under the gun. My back's crawlin'. Our belts are gone."

As one man they turned, saw Hoss standing there in the gloom, a gun in each fist, the faint light sparkling cruelly across his eyeballs. "Pitch up," he said, his voice sheering through the strung stillness. "Call on Jehovah to witness you're plumb through hellin' it across this range an' framin' men into hang ropes."

Tol Henline, patently the strong man and spokesman, screamed the only answer he knew. "Grat! Joe! It's death if he takes us. Can't be no worse to—" He swung a chair high and charged to cover the draw of the pair who wore their guns. Hoss' gun kicked up a crash that seemed to bow the walls. Henline, struck in the throat, croaked and collapsed, the chair falling atop him.

Grat and Joe, their blood lust strengthened by Henline's injunction, whipped out their irons and roared at Hoss. Their bullets hit the wall as Hoss ghosted aside. The cowman's guns boomed again, jarring the frail flame on the wick and filling the room with smoke. Grat shrieked, dropped his weapons, tried to retreat but went down, crying his terror of death. Joe, shot through the heart, spun and fell across Henline's body.

It was justifiable and it was right. But it was also merciless. Strang Ijams cursed bitterly, staring at all the naked inhumanity of the man who had slain half of their number.

Hoss faced the shaken trio. "Get down on your faces, hands crossed over your backs. Or do you want to play the suckers' game they did, bucking the drop of a man who'd as soon kill your kind as look at yuh? Down!"

They fell forward to their faces, obeying hysterically. And, even as Hoss' lips parted to call on Ringo, the glass was slashed from a pane behind him and a voice said: "Your last order, Greer."

A gun blast roared through the house and Hoss was smashed off balance. He hit the wall, shoulder on, spinning. He tried to get his gun around, but slipped to his knees and went down as the door burst open and another shot whispsawed him from the flank. He was down then, without ever having sensed the fall, staring at the ceiling, blinking away the fog that clouded his vision. He heard the window being raised and Partee's voice as he clambered over the sill.

"Nice work, Lin. You too, Bull. Too bad we couldn't have got here a few minutes sooner."

"Too bad—yes, you buzzard!" That was Ringo's challenge as he smashed into the room. Hoss heard guns shaking the house but his mind had but the one facet. Into his vision had come a shape. It was Bull Bartlett, the marshal of Twin Buttes. He was squinting at Hoss, making sure there was no life in him. And, having found some, his gun was coming to Hoss' head. Hoss reached deep into his well of strength, tilted his gun muzzle and delivered the shot. Bull dropped like a poleaxed animal he was named for.

Caught as if in a cloudburst torrent, Hoss fought blindly, rolled to his side. He saw blurred and formless shadows, heard the crash of guns and Partee's death-scream.

Hoss' wobbling hand lifted, steadied. He dropped the hammer, saw the mayor drop with a great raging cry. The man called Lin, the poisonous one who always asking for blood, was crumpling to the floor. That then was the last of the tigerish energy that always saw Hoss through. He was on his back again and

Ringo's face floated before him—a bloody face filled with the fierce joy of victory.

"Hoss! Hoss—" The words washed out. "Don't die on me, Hoss. You—"

"A—man don't die till his number's up, son," Hoss murmured. "But a man's gotta sleep, ain't he?" And then he knew no more. . . .

THE high and the low of Twin Buttes had clamored to enter the sick room, as soon as it was known that Old Hoss Greer would survive his wounds. But aside from Ringo, who came every day, the first visitor allowed was the tall, cadaverous man who wielded a strange, awesome power over most men he came in contact with—Porter McFee.

"Whole county's waiting to thank you, Greer," he said, with becoming shyness. "You've not only showed us the error of this reform business, but you've recalled the debt we owed Old Damon Dudley, by going him one better."

"Pshaw, I never saw the day I could hold a candle to that old hell-bender, McFee."

"Saving that money for the bank depositers made a big hit here, Greer. You can have the job as long as you want it."

"Long." Hoss chuckled. "I've had it about ten-twelve times as long now as I expected. So long I need a long, long vacation from sheriffin'. It's a job for a young feller, McFee. Youth must be served. You folks is out on the street, hashin' over things that are mostly in yore minds an' makin' a hero of me. Shucks, I made a gosh-awful mess of it, got shot down by lettin' 'em get behind me. Why, if it hadn't been for Ringo, I'd uh bin just another argument for the reform movement. Nope, you ask the board to accept my resignation, appoint Ringo my successor an' add my wages, whatever they are to the fund to raise a nice stone over Ol' Damon's grave. Ringo will give you the details. Do them things for me, will you, McFee?"

"Surely will," said the lawyer, and from that day forth became another of the politicians Hoss excoriated yet held in the strong bonds of his rugged friendship.

THE END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# Long Hair, Long Rifle —and Sudden Death!

★ By WILLIAM R. COX ★

The mounted man had not seemed to move, but the spurt of fire was unmistakable. . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

### Caravan Spy

THE Arapahoes were stoical as stone images in the howling wind which whipped down from the peaks of the Tetons and strewed the earth with mounds of snow. They huddled under a cliff, grim and fatalistic.

Tom Peak was in the center of them. They had unbound him in order that they might travel faster. The storm had caught them unaware, far from their sheltered camp, and the prisoner was no longer a matter of concern. Tom looked gloomily up the canyon. Dred Agar was dead and the winter's trapping lost. The big adventure which had begun in St. Louis was ended—and Tom would never live to see New Year's, 1843.

He wondered about Captain Dave Tugwell, the bluff man who had staked them and sent them out to gather otter, beaver and fox. In the spring Tugwell was to bring the caravan and pay off. This was one stake the big man would lose—but he had many more among the mountain men. Tom would have given a lot for a slug of Tugwell's raw whiskey right now as he watched the snow pile up before the crevasse where the Arapahoes huddled.

Slingshot, the minor chieftain who had knocked Tom out and made him captive after Dred had gone down under tomahawks, spoke shortly to the others. They immediately prepared to make a fire. The spark caught and a little blaze went up to the accompaniment of grunts of satisfaction. Then the wind came in an especially malignant burst, and when they could see again through the icy swirling air the fire was gone, twigs and all.

Slingshot glared at Tom as though it were his fault. The others muttered and Slingshot's hand went to the knife at his belt. The superstitious Indians were ready to make a sacrifice to their gods, Tom knew. He flexed his muscles beneath the buckskins and was ready. Better to die quickly, now, in action, than to survive and be tortured.

But Slingshot was malevolent. He wanted to satisfy his cruelty later, in camp, at leisure. He grunted a command and the Arapahoes resumed immobility of pose and expression. The wind howled on.

How long it was Tom never quite knew. But dusk came suddenly and the evil-smelling braves drew close together for warmth. They forced Tom to the outside, and he had to keep moving to stay alive. He was staring at the snow, trying to penetrate it—when the vision appeared.

He could not but believe he was delirious. No man would be riding one horse and leading another through this neglected pass of the mountain range. Not a blond man with long hair and a spade beard falling over his chest, wearing buckskins and an Indian blanket—not at this season of the year!

The first shot startled Tom almost out of his wits. The tall blond man had not seemed to move, but the spurt of fire, the singing of the bullet was unmistakable. Tom leaped forward, blindly. His legs let him down and he went headfirst into a drift.

Slingshot was yelling. There followed the short, flat report of a pistol shot, then another.

Tom extricated himself and ran, calling, "I'm a white man! Wait for me!"

Just ahead of him a rusty voice growled, "What'd ye think I come fer! Get onto that nag. It's too dumbed cold to reload."

Arrows were twanging and Slingshot's ancient musket whined. The snow came flurrying again and Tom managed to get hold of the blessed saddle horn and pull himself up. The man ahead held a lead rein and started off, leisurely enough. Slingshot and the others would not follow, would not dare leave their shelter, Tom realized. The horses plodded ahead, and the blond man rode as though he were going down Brown's pasture to the Jones' house across the road, back in New Hampshire.

Tom was limp with reaction, but he managed to keep himself awake by wondering what manner of man was this who rode through the unexplored range as though it were his back lot. The steeds climbed a slope, turned sharply into a defile. The wind ceased as though by magic.

In the gathering dark Tom could see a dugout, then another which must be the stable. All around them the mountains came in, but in this spot there was peace and a cessation of the cold. A stream ran swiftly, tinkling with ice.

The man dismounted and said, "Stir yourself, stranger. Make a fire and exercise yer blood. Be right with ye."

Inside was a bed of boughs in a corner, rude benches fastened with rawhide or vines. Tom could breathe again, could feel the numbness leaving his limbs. The fire crackled merrily. The tall blond man came in, shutting the door carefully.

He was a giant, but lean, with wide shoulders and thin hips and long legs. His cheekbones were prominent above the beard, and his gray eyes deep and bright. His blond hair, Tom saw now, was streaked with white. He was not a young man, although he moved with the vigor of of youth.

Tom said slowly, "You must be Jib Silt."

The big man nodded. "Been watchin' you an' Dred. Knew Slingshot'd git ye. Dred allus was a fool."

Tom said, "You—you're the Outlaw of the Mountains."

"They calls me that," said Jib Silt with satisfaction.

"Captain Tugwell offered us five thousand dollars to get you," said Tom.

"The cheap skunk," said Jib Silt in-

dignantly. "I cost him twenty times that much every year!"

Tom drew a deep breath of the leaping warm air from the fire. He was a compact youth, dark, sturdy with the work of farm years, tough as nails from the mountain season. He looked into the gray eyes of the giant and said, "I was a gone chicken. You got me out, neat as a pin. Whatever reason you had for savin' me—I'm your man."

Jib Silts' eyes kindled. He roared in his rusty voice, "By gum, that's well spoken! Ye'll stay with me until the spring. Then ye can make up yer own mind whether to jine me. Is it a deal?"

They shook hands. It was like signing a lifetime treaty.

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JIB SILT said, "Bridger's got his Fort. Carson's allus on a mission or somethin'. Clyman quit, then come back and jest wanders. We open the mountain trails and the emigrants come. We kill off the Injuns, make the country safe. We've about finished.

"But Tugwell and his kind have made the money off our sweat and blood. And they've swindled us, from the days of the Scotch company, through Hudson's Bay, down till now. They've given us a panniken of likker, a bag of possibles, a pouch of powder and a belt of shot and turned us a-loose. When the likker had run us inta debt for other things we couldn't use, they've made peons of us like the Spanish did the Injuns. Then Tugwell did worse."

It was early spring. Jib had trimmed his beard and Tom was clean shaven. The birds were singing in the Tetons, where the trees bore green. Jib and Tom had talked the winter away and this was the summing up. Tom listened, knowing he heard the truth. He had only spent this one year in the mountains. Jib had spent a generation among them.

"I know that Tugwell staked ye," said Jib. "Mebbe ye can repay the stake. But this year Tugwell pays me fer when he stole my gal and my pelts back in '39. He made an outlaw of me. I had a pardner, but Tugwell caught him at Independence and shot him. I went in last fall and I learned where Tugwell was goin'. I knew then that I could git him if I found another pardner. Dred was allus an easy mark."

Tom said, "I'm with you, Jib. I never liked Tugwell. His whiskey was bad and his eyes were shifty."

Jib nodded. "And his guns are fast. He's a mighty tough man and a rich one. He gets our pelts fer nothin' and makes a fortune on them. But this year he's bringin' out some emigrants and he's gotta stick to the trail. They got to go through South Pass about the first of July. When they git below Soda Springs, I'll be waitin'. Tugwell will have what pelts he's picked up. I want him and them furs—that's all."

Tom said, "I'll help. I don't like playin traitor, but you're entitled to them. And I owe you my life."

Jib Silt's face was stony. "Tugwell's been a traitor to every man he's ever known. Take the black hoss and go down. Jine them, stay with them, and be ready at Sheep Rock."

He stood, compelling, somber, full of his deep hatred, staring at Tom. He was,

Tom sometimes believed, a little mad. On the subject of Tugwell and the other traders he was malignant. He would kill them as he would slap a mosquito—or shoot an Arapahoe. He and his kind had opened the mountain trails with their sheer brutality plus their consummate skill at the Indians' own game.

Yet there was dignity and purpose in Jib Silt. He was powerful, clean of body and mind, unlike the mountainy rascals Tom had met before. He was four times the man Dred Agar had been.

Tom felt the strength of him, the righteousness of his crusade. He said, "I'll do what you say, Jib. I'll shoot Tugwell myself, if need be. We can live in the mountains, always. We'll get through to California or Salt Lake with the skins. It'll work out."

Jib nodded, and they went to saddle the black horse. It was necessary for Tom to ride alone, following the trails Jib had outlined a hundred times. He must arrive without powder, bedraggled, starved. His story must be perfect, for Tugwell was old in the ways of the mountains.

Tom rode down the ravine, looking back for one glimpse of the stalwart, lone figure. He saluted, and Jib's hand shot up in farewell. Then Tom was on his own, riding eastward and north to the Trail for Oregon where Tugwell would be found.

He had never been quite so alone in his life before, he found. In ten miles he was thrice tempted to go back and make some excuse to speak once more with Jib Silt. The big man had so dominated him during that winter that he felt empty, riding alone down the mountainside.

He made camp that night on the edge of a plain. He could not sleep, and the stars winked at him as though to mock his nostalgia. His imagination, which had always been a comfort, plagued him by leaping ahead into the turmoil to come. He had a role to play, and he was not an actor.

The black horse nickered and he arose restlessly, going to the hobbled animal. He came wide awake, now, and some instinct bade him grip the carefully oiled rifle.

He heard the whoops then, and the shadowy forms came in. Of this too Jib had warned him. Slingshot would never forget the ignominy of losing his prisoner. Unable to find Jib's camp, he would lurk in the hopes of a lucky encounter. Tom held his fire until the arrows came closer.

Then he aimed carefully, as Jib had taught him, picking out the biggest attacker. The man screamed and fell. Another took his place and Tom's pistol spoke once, twice, three times. It was a five-shooter, a special gift from Jib, and it worked well and no cap failed.

Tom's fingers snatched at the hobbles as more war cries sounded on the circle. His blanket was gone, his saddle was out of reach. He managed to squirm bareback upon the black, clutching his rifle to him. He saw a brave coming in recklessly and used the last loaded chamber of the pistol.

The sound of the shot in the horse's ear set him off. Straight through the night, Tom bent low upon his neck, went black animal and fleeing man. For a while there was pursuit—but as dawn broke the weary horse and bleary-eyed rider topped a rise and looked back at an empty plain.

So there was Tom Peak, without saddle or blanket, with only powder, ball, a pistol and a rifle, hundreds of miles and two months from his destination, with only the wilderness off which to exist. It seemed to him that Jib Silt, up in the mountain fastness, was chuckling. This would enable Tom to enact his role without chicanery. It would be a forlorn rider who trekked into Captain Dave Tugwell's encampment.

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CAPTAIN DAVE TUGWELL had a blue jacket with brass buttons, of the type worn by the rivermen. He had a wide, flat face, with china-blue eyes. He wore a hearty bluff air as he wore his coat.

There were only six wagons, and three of them belonged to Tugwell. They were driven by hard-handed teamsters and led by Sam Longman, the veteran mountain man. Sam was wizened and a killer of red men and white, whiskey sodden but canny as Slingshot or any other Arapahoe.

The three wagons of emigrants had never been west of the river. One be-

longed to Joel Stoney of Bridgport. One was owned by Abner Double of Jersey. They were half-frightened and their wives were peaked drabs, yet they stubbornly had heeded the call of Western land—of easy winters and lush summers. Each day they were ready to push onward to the setting sun.

Paddy Ryan was different. Out of County Cork, via New York City, he had planned long and well. His Conestoga was durable and light-packed for the long haul. His daughter Norah was slight and fair, with greenish eyes and raven hair.

Nine hundred and fifty miles from Independence, the wagon train made camp on the summit of the divide. Tugwell's wagons were beginning to reap a harvest from the trappers who came gaunt and hungry, laden with their furs. The whiskey stock went down, the riches in pelts went up.

There was a little trouble with a couple of trappers who felt cheated, but Paddy Ryan's big fists and Tugwell's ready guns quelled the riot. Paddy, although ignorant of the trail, was proving a good lieutenant.

Captain Tugwell's spirits were high. All was going well enough, and when he had collected his wagons full he could turn back, leaving Sam Longman to guide the party to Oregon. If Sam stayed with them —which Tugwell doubted. But that did not matter—so Tugwell had collected his fee in advance, as usual. It was a new thing—guiding emigrants to Oregon. And, as furs were not bringing the prices due to a glut of the market, maybe he would take it up in earnest next year. Maybe he would find a wife. That girl of Jib Silt's—He scowled at the thought of Jib Silt.

He was the first to see the figure riding in on the scarecrow horse which had once been sleek and black. He stood erect, wary always, his hand on the twin pistols at his belt. Little Sam unlimbered a rifle and hid behind an outspanned wagon.

The man drooped, starved, bearded, emaciated. He came down from the bare back of the horse and said thickly, "Been outa powder some time. . . . Killed a beaver last week with a club. . . . But it didn't stick with me, somehow. . . . How are you, Captain?"

Tugwell stared at the incoherent young man.

Sam came out trailing the rifle and said, "Damn if it ain't young Peak! Where's Dred, Peak?"

"Arapahoes," muttered Tom. "Got our pelts. Got Dred. Tomahawks. I lit out—"

"When was this?" demanded Tugwell. "What of your debt to me, Peak? This is too damned bad!"

Tom made a weak gesture. "Have to start over. New partner. . . . Dred's gone. . . . Mountains are tough—but I got through!"

Tugwell said disgustedly, "You miserable tenderfoot! *You* got through. What of my pelts?"

Tom shrugged and sat down slowly upon the ground. "I dunno. Arapahoes got 'em, I guess. I'm tired—" He closed his eyes and seemed to go to sleep on the spot.

Sam said, "Dred never did have good sense. Shouldn't a sent him out with this greenie."

Paddy Ryan came from his wagon and looked curiously down at the sleeping man. He said, "Is he one of yours now, Captain?"

"He will be if he lives," said Tugwell heavily. "He owes me a debt."

"Sure, he's weary," said Paddy sympathetically. "Don't bother yerself about him, Captain. I'll take care o' the lad. He'll mebbe be company for the colleen."

He bent and in one motion scooped Tom from the earth. He walked, staggering a little under the burden, to a spot where Norah already had spread blankets and was re-heating the stew of buffalo hump from which they had made the evening meal.

Tugwell watched thoughtfully, stroking his square chin. Paddy Ryan was a tough man, good on the trail, but he had a way of acting independently of Tugwell. He was all smiles and geniality—but Tugwell used that line himself. The captain wondered, and his eyes never left Norah as she ministered gently to the reclining Tom Peak.

Perhaps Sam should have orders. Perhaps the tiny caravan was never destined for Oregon, after all. If it should be lost —with only Norah surviving and Tugwell should conveniently happen along to save her. . . .

There was a renegade Arapahoe named

Slingshot with whom Tugwell had done business in the past. If Slingshot had not been able to find and kill Jib Silt this year, he would be ripe for another task. He would be humiliated at his failure and eager for an attack upon such a small party of whites.

There was time. They were ahead of schedule and the mountains could produce any emergency which a smart man might avail himself. Tom Peak owed a bill, too. He could be useful. He would be forced to obey Captain Tugwell—and then he could be eliminated. No one would miss a stray greenhorn like Peak.

Yes, thought the captain, this would take a little thought, a bit of co-operation, then all would be well. He rubbed his hairy hands together. He had thought of Norah before, but had been a bit wary of Paddy Ryan's strength. Peak's return had set off a train of thought which might, in the end, lead to a fine piece of business. He was almost grateful to the luckless Peak.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Council in the Night

IN TWO weeks Tom Peak was reclothed, hearty and hale. His recovery had been miraculous. He rode the black horse alongside the Ryan wagon and conversed with the girl whose green eyes slanted sideways at him. He told her, "We'll be through the Pass pretty soon."

She said, "Over halfway. It's been a good trip. Many others will come after us. It's a fever, the West. Once on a body and he is done until he sees it."

Paddy Ryan boomed, "It's a new country. The strong always seek a frontier. Me fathers niver lived in a town until fifty years agone, when I was born in Cork."

The Ryans were merry. The Stoneys and the Doubles were plodding, hopeful small people, but the Ryans were robust and strong. In a week they would be at Soda Springs, and Jib Silt would come to claim his due, and Tom would be free of debt.

He no longer was dubious of his part in the affair to come. Captain Tugwell had barely spoken to him after he had awakened from his sleep of exhaustion. The others had been disinterested, except the Ryans. Sam had only asked slyly if he had heard word of Jib. The three teamsters were sullen brutes, mere satellites of Tugwell.

They rode through the pass and Tugwell was loud giving orders, as though he was trying to impress someone. Then he dropped back and said curtly, "Go ahead, Peak. Be of some use. There might be Indians. Scout a bit and bring some meat."

Tom said, "I'm short of powder."

"I gave you powder," sneered Tugwell. "You lost it in the mountains—where I should've sent a man instead of a boy."

Tom's biceps bulged under the linsey jacket he had borrowed from Paddy Ryan. The big Irishman glanced thoughtfully at him and Norah discreetly withdrew beneath the canvas of the Conestoga. But it was not time, and Tom bit back his anger. Ryan looked puzzled and disappointed.

Tugwell roared, "Get goin', Peak! I gave you an order."

Tom said mildly, "Yes, sir." He spurred the black horse and rode ahead. He passed the other wagons and came to a break in the hills. He went up through the woods, looking for game tracks. He followed a deer to a spring and waited, and a doe came along, lightfooted, big-eyed. He had to grit his teeth to make the shot, but game was not plentiful lately.

He skinned the animal, thinking of this scarcity of wild life. It had only been the last three days, but they had run short of meat, and suddenly there was none. He cut off the carcass what he needed and slung it on his saddle.

Then he decided to walk, leading the horse, examining the soft earth as Jib had told him. He circled one way, then cut a swathe north, going slow. Time passed, but he scarcely noticed, so intent was he, and so wrapped in thoughts of Norah, of Jib, of Tugwell. He almost missed the plain sign of a moccasin.

But there it was, beneath a giant tree. He could see where the brave had sprung upward. He grasped his rifle and peered into the branches, then hastily examined the ground until he found a faint track leading southward. A spy had been here, climbed the tree, descended and gone to

make his report. The wagon train was under surveillance!

He mounted and rode fast. The day was waning and that night they would camp on Fontanelle Creek. Tom cut a line straight for the spot Sam had told him about and saw the wagons being unhitched. The girl was standing, her eyes shaded, watching for him.

He dropped a tender ham at her feet and said, "Fresh meat, Norah!"

She said gravely, "You're worried. What is it?"

"It's nothing," he said.

"I know better," she smiled gently. "It's not that Captain Tugwell shamed you, is it? Because I know you were unafraid."

He said, "I'd forgotten that. Believe me."

She said, "Then it's Indians. Because we have no game. The Indians have chased it away."

"You're a real frontier gal." He grinned at her. "There's bound to be Indians, you know. They won't attack us."

She picked up the ham and said candidly, "I'm not afraid so long as you and Dad are around."

He gulped, but it was not time to speak to her. He led his horse to the picket line, disposed of his meat and sought Captain Tugwell where he lounged with Sam and a couple of teamsters. In a low voice he told them what he had found.

Tugwell grunted, "Hunting party, prob'ly. Nothin' to be scared of here. But you better look, Sam." He pierced the old mountaineer with a long, meaningful gaze.

Sam drawled, "Reckon I had. Might git a scalp or two. I haven't killed a redskin in most two months!"

Tom was watching the teamsters. They seemed utterly unconcerned.

Tugwell said, "We'll take every precaution. And don't tell the others, Peak! They git panicky."

Tom said, "Whatever you say, sir." He was, he thought, playing his part with Tugwell. The captain dismissed him without ceremony or respect. He was able to drift away and go back to the Ryans for his supper.

He said quietly, "Don't tell Tugwell, Paddy, but there is danger of an Indian attack. If the Arapahoes have drifted this far north, it'll be at night and sudden. You and me will keep watch. Sam's going on a scout."

Paddy Ryan chewed a delicious morsel of venison, swallowed, and said slowly, "Tom, me boy, do ye trust Sam Longman?"

Tom said, "I trust no one except you and Norah."

"Ah!" said Paddy. "Meanin' the doughty captain. I minded the way ye looked at him this mornin'. What's the play, Tom?"

"I can't tell you," Tom said. "But it won't hurt you, nor the other emigrants."

"Ye're not with Injuns?" demanded Paddy sternly.

"No," said Tom.

The big Irishman considered. Then he said, "I knew ye wasn't as weak as ye made out when ye come in. And ye're not the kind of lad to take back talk from Tugwell, big as he is, unless ye had a reason. So I figgered there was somethin'—"

"Later," said Tom. "I'll tell you about it later."

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PADDY RYAN nodded and was serene again. He took the first watch and Tom slept heavily after his exertions of the day. At midnight Paddy woke him and whispered, "Hey! Sam went out and was only gone an hour. Now he's back in."

Tom whispered, "Okay, Paddy. I'll nose around."

The wagons made a small but tight square. The stock was inside and every man slept near his arms. One of the teamsters seemed awake, huddled in a blanket, squatting, so Tugwell was keeping watch also, although he had given no general order.

Tom walked beyond the wagons, treading softly, carrying only his pistol and a tomahawk. He saw nothing, heard only the regular breathing of the emigrants. He began to retrace his steps.

A figure seemed to rise out of the night before him, growling, "Where the hell ye goin'?"

It was one of the teamsters. That made two who were awake. Tom said, "I'm just walking to get sleepy."

"Well, walk back and keep yer trap shet!"

Tom obediently walked back. He skirted the wagons on the far side. Now he kept low, careful not to make a silhouette against the night sky. He saw the third teamster, patrolling the approach to Tugwell's wagon. Sam would also be somewhere about.

Sam was the one to fear. The little mountain man had all the art and skill of his breed. Tom cut back between the wagons of Double and Stoney, skulking like an Indian. He waited a long while, listening as hard as he could.

He heard the murmur of voices, but he could not distinguish a word. He crept closer, straining his eyes for sight of Sam. He heard Tugwell's bass accents. They rumbled on and on, as though giving long-winded instructions. If Tugwell was talking with Sam, then the way was clear for Tom to go forward and listen in. He had forgotten all about the threat of an Indian attack in the throes of this new development which stemmed from Sam's short scouting trip.

He made a few yards flat on his belly, toward Tugwell's biggest wagon. There was no light, but he could hear the low voice still. He listened for Sam's reply.

There was a moment of complete silence. Then Tugwell got his answer—but it was not in Sam's accents. At that moment Sam's head popped up not ten feet from where Tom lay, turning this way and that. Tom could hear the mountain man sniff the air, as though to smell out an intruder.

Tom held his breath and waited. Sam moved. He came crawling, directly to where Tom lay in the deep shadow of the wagons. Tom got his legs beneath him and made a ball of his body and limbs.

Sam almost ran smack into him. Tom reached out and with one iron hand clutched the wizened face, smothering the thin lips. His other fist banged downward behind Sam's ear. There was a slight exhalation beneath his restraining palm, then Sam Longman stretched himself on the sward and knew no more for that time.

Tom skipped along as nimbly as possible, making sure the teamsters did not spot him within the enclosure. He came to the rear of Tugwell's wagon and dived under as though into a stream. He remained very still, listening.

Tugwell said, "Beyond Beer Spring. . . . No make mistake, now. . . . Give plenty skins—whiskey—guns—"

There was a grunting guttural reply which Tom could not understand. Then there was a lithe movement and a pair of leggins came into view, fringed and beaded. A naked torso followed. Tom held his breath, staring.

Even in the darkness, by faint starlight, he could not forget that conical head, the sloping brow, the prognathous jaw of Slingshot. The single feather still adorned the scalplock, the oiled broad shoulders loomed for a moment in plain sight. Tom could have drawn his pistol and shot the Arapahoe chieftain on the spot.

But before he could recover from this surprise, Slingshot was gone. He had faded into outer darkness. The teamster who had challenged Tom was out there. Tom waited, his gun in his hand, his tomahawk drawn.

The teamster came plodding in. His hoarse voice called, "All right, boss?"

"Shut up and turn in," said Tugwell from the wagon above Tom. "Get the others in. And make no noise!"

The driver muttered and turned away. Tom came out from under the wagon like a greased cat. He made his way behind the teamster, who was no woodsman. He took an oportunity to slip between the wagons and waken Paddy Ryan.

He said in the ear of the Irishman, "I had to sock Sam. They'll know who did it, because I was discovered awake just before then. Slingshot was in for a confab with Tugwell. The captain means to throw you to the Arapahoes."

"I am not surprised," said Ryan. "He's been givin' the eye to Norah lately."

"They mentioned a place I don't know," said Tom rapidly. "But I can get help, I think. We've no chance without help. Before Tugwell gets after me for sluggin' Sam, I'll go and try to find my friend. You'll have to watch out and trust me, Paddy."

From beyond her father, Norah said, "Go on, Tom. We trust you. Go—and come back to us."

Tom pressed Paddy's shoulder, then grabbed his rifle and went. He saddled

the black horse, took powder and shot from Tugwell's own wagon. He mounted the horse and was gone to the west and south before the hue and cry was raised over Sam Longman's unconscious form.

## CHAPTER THREE

### One-Man Army

NOW it was a test of how much he had learned from Jib Silt, from his year in the mountains and on the trail. He knew Jib would be gone from the ravine below the Tetons. He had to figure just where the old mountain man would go, and what path he would take. He had to intercept Jib and hasten him.

Somewhere between him and Jib were the Arapahoes, and this would be no small hunting party. They would be attuned for war, ready to attack the whites who were slowly forcing them out of the country. Yet Tom did not worry about the Indians.

The black horse had been selected by Jib and had bottom. They rode out the night, bearing north over the mountains. Then they found a cave and Tom slept. By noon he was up again and going west across the hills. The black grew weary under the afternoon sun, and again he rested, always thinking, figuring the time of the year, the number of days to Soda Springs where Jib was to meet him.

He turned back north through a pass. He came to a high promontory and climbed a tree. He saw smoke and immediately came down to earth. He proceeded afoot, cautiously, not sure of his bearings. The woods were thick and the smoke seemed to come from a clearing in their midst. He made his way from trunk to trunk, leaving the black horse tethered to a sapling.

He heard a whippoorwill on his left Another answered on his right. The afternoon sun did not come through the thick forest and he could not see too well. He crept under a bush, holding his rifle ready, listening.

The whippoorwills were annoyingly active. He stayed beneath his bush for an hour, listening to them. There were several, and they were going forward, away from him. They called in peculiar cadence.

He came out from under the bush like a scared rabbit. These were not forest birds calling their mates. There were too many and they called too often. They traveled too close together, and all went in one direction.

He slipped along, dragging his gun. The smoke had gone, but his many sightings upon the spot where it had been stood him in good stead. He traversed a hundred painful yards, and then he saw the first patch of brown skin. He froze, watching.

The Indian was behind a clump of willows. It was amazing to watch him slip out, move along like a snake, break into a dazzling sprint, gain the trunk of a giant oak. He made less sound than a fox in a native habitat.

Tom raised his gun automatically, then lowered it as the bird call sounded again. They were too many. He could not fight a half dozen of them in the woods. He had not the skill.

He went ahead doggedly, knowing that at any moment a tomahawk might whizz through the air to part his hair for one last time. He had to know who was in that clearing, being stalked by redskins. If it was Jib Silt, he had to convey the mysterious talk about Beer Spring. It was not just Jib Silt and Tom Peak—it was the Doubles and the Stoneys and Paddy and Norah most of all.

The first howl went up and a musket banged. Tom had lost his man for the moment, but in another he was in sight, leaping forward, drawing a bow. Tom knelt and aimed for the spot beneath the coppery shoulder blade.

The gun bucked. The black smoke drifted and Tom moved hastily, but not until he had seen the Indian go down. He ran forward, reloading as Jib had taught him, seeking a thick tree trunk. He ran smack into the arms of a figure which stepped out of a thicket.

He fought himself free, but a hand was over his mouth, shutting off speech and air. In his ear a voice said, "Quiet, sonny. Ye done good so far. Been watchin' ye fer half an hour."

The hand went away and Tom said, "Jib! You old coot! I thought they had you surrounded!"

The big man chuckled, picking his rifle from its spot against a young tree. "Chirp-

in' like birds, the ninnies! Musta thought I was an emigrant! They're young bucks. See?"

Two Indians, wild-eyed, had spotted them and were charging fanatically forward while another pair strung their arrows. The Indians were very brave. Tom nailed one in the belly and saw him still try to come for the kill. Jib fired carelessly from the hip. His man dropped like a stone, shot between the eyes.

The arrows whizzed, but the two white men were prone, reloading with magically swift hands. Before Tom could throw home his charge, Jib had shot again. In the hands of these men the long-barreled, ancient rifles were deadlier than the new-fangled breech loaders. The two Indians with the bows keeled over.

They waited a long time, then Jib whispered, "Might be a wise old head with 'em. He'd ketch us comin' out."

Tall grass stirred on their right. Jib said, "Look alive, now. Be back later."

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BEFORE Tom could blink the old trapper was gone and there was neither sound nor motion to mark his passing. Twice Tom saw the Indian move in the grass, but he did not shoot. It was a fascinating game to the death. The light was fading, but Tom could witness the drama to the finish.

Soon the Indian was yards closer. He had, Tom could see, a firearm of some sort and a long knife which he clutched in his left hand. Tom lay still, concealed behind a leafy barrier. The grass parted and he saw the Indian's crafty, lined face. He was a veteran, who had not taken part in the charge upon the white men's rifles.

Then, behind the Indian, blades of grass moved imperceptibly, as though the wind barely swept their top. Tom never saw Jib come in. He only saw this slight graceful movement, then a leap into the air. He saw a hatchet go up, come down. He saw the face of the Indian show comical surprise even as he died.

Jib stood up, holding a gory piece of hair in his hand. He said, "Got to scalp 'em all. Might as well learn, Tom. Makes 'em sick when they see the bodies, ye know. Part of their superstition is to carry their hair inta the grave."

Tom could not learn. He was ill after his first attempt to lift hair and had to quit.

Jib said sadly, "Ye'll never make a real mountain man. But that's jest as well. Won't be none left pretty soon. What about Tugwell?"

Tom said, "There's hell to pay." He told his story, breathlessly. He ended, "And we've got to save 'em somehow. Norah—her father—those emigrants."

Jib stroked his short, vari-colored beard. He said, "The gal, huh? That would be Tugwell's deal. Slingshot's a renegade. That means the hull Arapahoe nation won't be in on it. Mebbe forty, fifty braves. All Slingshot could handle. These wasn't Arapahoes, ye know. Creeks. Slingshot must have a gang over in the hills. Beer Spring, huh? Ho!"

"If I'd known where Beer Spring was, I'd have stuck with them," said Tom. "I know I took a chance, coming after you."

"You did good," said Jib. "Too bad ye got a queasy stumick. Ye're a smart boy in the mountains. So ye didn't know where-at was Beer Spring? Ho! Ho!"

Tom said, "I never heard of it."

"Beer Spring," explained Jib, grinning, "is just an old mountainy way of sayin' Soda Springs. The trappers made a joke because it tastes bitter-like and called it Beer Spring."

Tom said, "Then that's where you planned to hit Tugwell?"

"Couldn't be a better place," said Jib ruefully. "Looks like Slingshot and Tugwell's as smart as me!"

"If I'd stayed," said Tom disconsolately, "we could have gone ahead on schedule. I did wrong, Jib."

The bearded giant shook his head. He said, "Nope. Ye did right. They mighta struck ahead of us. Now we can sorta keep track of 'em. Only you better go back."

Tom nodded. "Tugwell might tie me up, but Paddy'll turn me loose. I'll see he don't murder me."

"He'll try," agreed Jib amiably. "Sam, now, he'll know you hit him and he'll have a knife whetted fer yer back. It'd be safer t' stay with me."

"I'll go," said Tom flatly.

"Knew ye would," said Jib. "There's the gal!"

Tom said, "You'll come in? When they attack, you'll be there? Can we manage it, just a few of us against Tugwell and the Arapahoes?"

Jib chuckled. "I dunno. But won't Tugwell be surprised when we try? It'll be worth it, just to see his ugly face."

Tom said, "I got some jerky. Let's eat one meal together, anyway. It's—good to see you again, Jib."

The deep gray eyes crinkled, first with surprise, then with emotion. "Dad-gum it, I'm glad to see you agin, Tom! First man I been glad to see sence '39."

They ate. There was not much more to say, and Tom knew he had to be off. They shook hands once more.

Jib said, "Watch your back. I'll take keer of the flanks. We'll be together in couple days. So-long, Tom. An' good huntin', ol' trapper!"

There was a warmth inside of him as he rode on the faithful black, down towards the Oregon Trail. The giant mountain man would be on hand when Slingshot struck.

He was almost back to the caravan before it occurred to Tom that Jib Silt was only one man with a frontier rifle against two score or more Indians and five well-armed treacherous white men, two of whom were skilled fighters, one a mountain man himself. Stoney and Double were next to useless. Paddy Ryan was no rifleman. The odds were more than terrific.

It was a sober young man who forded the river and caught up with Captain Tugwell's party. He rode straight to the wagon of the stout man and said, "There are Indians all around. I had a fight with a couple. They're aimin' to hit us, Captain."

Tugwell roared, "where you been? What do you mean by slugging Sam Longman?"

Sam was riding toward them upon a mule, his pistol in his hand, his small face demoniac. There was a noticeable cant to his head, and a bruise beneath his ear.

Paddy Ryan handed the reins to Norah and silently got down from his wagon. He held a gun in his hand. As he passed the motionless wagons of Double and Stoney he jerked his head. To Tom's amazement the two stooped farmers came after Paddy, their fowling pieces ready.

Tom said quickly and loudly, "Hit Sam? Me? Does Sam say I hit him? When did I?"

Sam's mule stopped and Sam's face was a study. He shrilled, "Ye were up and around thet night. Jake seen ye!"

Tom said injuredly, "I took my horse and lit out to scout Indians. I didn't think you went far enough."

Paddy Ryan's mouth spread in a happy, Celtic grin. He waved his cohorts back to their wagons. Tugwell had not even seen the overt intent of his docile emigrants.

The captain snorted, "You're a damned fool and it's too bad you didn't get your hair lifted, Peak! Get back there and don't go traipsin' around like that again."

Sam was goggle-eyed, staring. He whined, "Well, who did hit me, then?"

"You got drunk and fell down," said Tugwell shortly. "And see you stay sober from now on out."

Tom went back and silently shook hands with Paddy. The Irishman whispered, "The farmer lads'll fight. Norah knew ye'd come back all right. Did ye git an army to help us out?"

Tom said, "I got one man, Paddy, but he's close to an army, at that."

Then he was holding Norah's hand and her green eyes were calm and happy upon him. Jib Silt had prophesied that Tom would never be a mountain man, one to wander the steep and lonely slopes. . . .

**William R. Cox, author of this novel of the old Oregon Trail, has another colorful long story of the booming Vigilante days in early California, when raw, red gold was dug from the ground—at the cost of miner's blood! Read "Hell Among The Angels!" in the current DIME WESTERN. Now at your newsstand!**

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Slingshot's Band

THE caravan made camp at Soda Springs. Tom helped Norah with the fire. He was trebly alert now, trying to watch for Indians, to keep an eye on Tugwell and to be ready for Jib Silt. It was still light, and Tom showed himself and the black horse, hoping that Jib would see him and give him some sign. There was no sign of the Arapahoes. Tugwell was somnolent and sullen, as though things had gone somehow awry.

Jib did not materialize. Tom turned, disappointed, and began a cautious ride south. The danger was increasing every moment, he felt. Tugwell's mood would change, then there would be fireworks. Tom had no illusions about the stout captain—a tough hombre who would have his way if people died all about him in the doing of it.

At Sheep Rock, just before the sharp turn, the black horse shied. Tom could not get his gun up, and the men who surrounded him were tough and agile. He saw the bearded faces of the teamsters and cried out:

"It's me, Peak!"

But they were dragging him down. Captain Tugwell's scowl was black and portentous. Tom ceased struggling. Tugwell leaned against the cliff. Two of the drivers held Tom. Sam Longman whetted his thin lips with a sharp, red tongue.

"This ain't sensible," Tom started to say. Then he saw Slingshot, tall and saturnine, behind Tugwell. He shut his mouth tight and made ready for what was to come.

Tugwell said, "You lost your outfit in December. Where were you until May?"

Tom did not answer. Slingshot uttered gutturals in Tugwell's ear. The Captain said, "Up in the Tetons, safe and snug. You come out with a horse. Slingshot knows that nag. It was stolen from his tribe—by Jib Silt!"

Tom was silent, measuring the odds. There was Sam and the captain and the three teamsters. But there seemed to be no other Indians with Slingshot, and among the crew was an undercurrent of mutual distrust and unrest. Tom sensed it, sniffing the air, looking for a chance.

They had not yet removed his knife from his leggin, although they had his pistol and rifle and axe. He relaxed in the grasp of the two drivers, hanging his head, looking out of the corners of his eyes.

He said, "That's right. Silt befriended me."

"You saw him again, when you went out!" snapped Tugwell. "The Arapahoes found dead Creeks in the mountains."

Tom said, "I don't know what you mean."

"Strip him!" ordered Tugwell. "He'll talk."

The teamsters peeled the shirt from his back. They turned him around and shoved him against the rock, pinning his arms wide. Tugwell coiled a blacksnake whip said thickly, "Talk, damn you! Tell us where we can find Silt!"

Tom said clearly, "You seem to have failed to muster your murdering Arapahoes. Are you afraid Jib's coming after you?"

The whip sang in the air, the lash swirled over Tugwell's head. It unfolded its stinging end in a crackling sound like a pistol shot. The teamsters hung on as the snapper cut Tom's shoulders, bringing blood which ran in a tiny stream, making him writhe despite himself.

"Talk!" shouted Tugwell. "Slingshot knows you've been with Silt, that thieving criminal! I'll cut you to bits and feed you to the beasts if you don't talk!"

Tom drooped, as though he were frightened to death. The blood oozed slowly and the teamsters seemed fascinated with the sight of it, relaxing their grip on his arms.

He bent his knees, calling on all his strength. He got his right arm loose with a jerk. He reached down for the long, keen knife they had forgotten and got a grip on the haft. He shifted, making himself a moving target.

Tugwell barked, "Hold him, you fools!"

Then Tom was lashing at the nearest teamster before they knew he was loose.

The man fell away, howling, "He stabbed me!"

Tugwell cried, "Don't kill him!"

The other two teamsters were circling

warily. There was an opening and Tom faked left, then dashed to the right, going between them. An arm reached out for him and he cut at it, sending the man away in fear. He heard Tugwell's whip scream in the air and shifted direction again, running inside the lash. Tugwell leaped away.

Slingshot threw his tomahawk. The hand of the redskin was sure, sending the axe flatted, intending to stun rather than kill.

Tom saw it coming, hunched his bare shoulder and ducked. The sharp blow sent him stumbling and he had to move swifter than ever to keep his feet.

★

HE MADE the black horse and threw himself into the saddle. They were all in motion, but no one shot at him until he was almost away. Then a scattered fire sent lead about his ears.

He bent low, urging the horse towards camp. He came dashing in ahead of the hot pursuit by a half mile. He saw Paddy Ryan tied to the big rear wheel of his wagon and slashed with the knife while the Irishman explained.

"They took us by surprise, bedad, soon as ye were out of sight. A damned redskin come in—"

"Slingshot," said Tom briefly. "Were there any others?"

"That I couldn't say," replied Paddy, rubbing his wrists, then grabbing a knife from his wagon to loosen the others. "They'll be comin' and we ought to git ready. Where is yer friend?"

"I don't know," groaned Tom. He found Norah trussed within the wagon. "There's something devilish wrong. We could have been massacred in spite of everything had Slingshot brought his war party." He tenderly cut the girl loose and she said:

"I've got two guns ready. Here they come!" She was not afraid, he saw. The two emigrants, Stoney and Double, were already unlimbering their blunderbusses. Paddy had a rifle and was urging them to the shelter of the wagon square.

The first shot, from Paddy's rifle, went close to Tugwell's ears. The party reined in and circled. Slingshot, riding a short-coupled cayuse, gave vent to a shrill war cry. Tugwell was cut off from his own wagons, now. Tom grabbed for a gun and took some heart.

But the night was falling and they were too few. One of the farmer women began to whimper and Stoney did not look in good health. These people would fight, but they had neither stomach nor skill for it. Norah was serene, reloading weapons for everyone. But Norah and Paddy and Tom could only stand them off by daylight. A night attack would end it.

Where was Jib Silt? Where was the tall man with the white and gold beard?

And where were the Arapahoe braves? Renegade though Slingshot was, Jib had said that there were always forty or fifty young bucks ready to go upon an adventure against the whites. What had happened to the war party?

One thing Tom knew: Slingshot, Tugwell and the others had been uncomfortable even while they were preparing to lash him to the point of death to make him talk. There was a tense feeling among them. It struck him suddenly what it was.

They were afraid! They had been desperate or they would have killed Tom at once. They needed information.

Tom fired his rifle at Tugwell, but the stout captain was safely out of range, down by the brook. He was talking with Sam, sitting his horse, not offering to attack. The others drew off, except Slingshot, who seemed to delight in running his cayuse close enough to take a shot with his rifle, then wheeling off before they could nail him.

The shadows were deepening on the purple, bare mountains. The scene became dismal, with only an occasional sporadic shot. Everyone seemed waiting for something.

Norah came close, shivering. She said, "What is it that hangs over us? There is great danger in the air for someone. We Irish feel it strong. See how dad frowns and bites his lips?"

Tom fretted. "I don't know. Tugwell is waiting. See—Sam rides towards the pines. I'm afraid Slingshot's band is coming in. Keep the guns loaded, darling. . . ."

She said, "Ah! You called me a sweet name."

He said, "I love you, Norah. The mountains were never for me after I saw your green eyes and black, lovely hair."

"I knew it," she breathed. "If we can only live through, dear Tommy!"

"We'll live," he said sturdily. "Somehow, we'll get through."

At that moment Tugwell stood in his stirrups and gave vent to a loud yell. Slingshot's mustang was near the woods and the renegade's egg-shaped head went back and the war cry of the Arapahoes came full-throated on the evening air. From the pines rode a band of redskins, brandishing weapons, screaming.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Mountain Men

PADDY RYAN said, "Night's comin' on. I can scarcely see the river." He peered in the direction of the water, slowly shaking his head.

"We've got to get out," said Tom emphatically. "We've got to fool them."

"The women!" objected Paddy. "They couldn't do it."

"They go first," said Tom. There was precious little daylight left. When the last ray of the sun disappeared the grayness set down upon them and the gunfire became bright and unreal. The forms riding and whooping were like nightmare riders.

Yet there were only a score of the newcomers. They had lost a few already, and the others were staying as far out of range as possible, guiding their horses in and away. Sam Longman came into view, trying to send one of his famed long shots home. Tom sighted upon the little mountain man and fired. The horse went down, but Sam rose over his head and lit running, vengefully shaking his gun above his head.

"We'll make for Sheep Rock," said Tom. "If we can slip away and get high enough on the Rock, we can make a good stand."

"They'll have our wagons. Sure, we'll be lost in the wilderness without food or shelter," objected Paddy.

"You'll be dead if you wait for them to charge," said Tom grimly. "There are too many of them and they know all about us. As soon as it gets full dark, you take the women and go. Stoney and Double can help me shoot rapidly to cover you. Then we'll come, one by one. Find a way up the black rocks, Paddy. It's up to you."

He fired again at a moving figure, saw it go down. The others were shooting steadily, their lean faces taut, and several Arapahoes seemed to go down. Marksmanship improved with practise, Tom thought with wry humor.

The last shadow lengthened and merged with all the others. They were within a blanket which covered them, shutting out everything but danger. Tom gripped Paddy's arm and said:

"Now! Take your pistols and fight your way if you must. They won't be looking for you, and you'll get through all right."

Norah kissed his cheek as Paddy marshaled the timid wives of the farmers. They went westward, sneaking along, each carrying a gun and what ammunition they could manage. Tom moved, covering Paddy's empty spot, shooting, reloading, shooting at vague shapes. The Tugwell wagon had provided shot and shell, at least. There was plenty to make a good fight.

He wondered about Jib Silt. He sent Stoney out, and there was no yelling nor concentrated firing—so he figured Paddy had got through all right. He had to move faster, now, to cover Stoney. He was sweating and his shoulder hurt from his injuries, but he moved swiftly and efficiently.

He said, "Go ahead, Double. I'll hold 'er."

The gaunt farmer hesitated. "Cain't we run it together?"

Tom said, "Thanks, but you go ahead."

The farmer said, "Yer a brave young 'un. If 'twarn't for Mandy, I wouldn't leave ye, sonny. . . ." Then he was gone, trailing his rifle, loping along.

A second later, Tom heard the unmistakable accents of Slingshot, off to the west. He heard Double cry out, heard the sound of a rifle shot, then silence. Then Slingshot broke loose his victory yell and a shudder shook Tom from head to toe. Poor Double would never see Mandy again.

It was hard work, firing the four guns. But Tom hurried, knowing now that Slingshot had cut off the retreat, that it was useless to follow the others of the party. The canny redskin had set men across the path to the Rock, surmising that an escape might be attempted. But perhaps they did not know that one already had been accomplished. Upon this Tom knew he must build.

He kept the guns going, wondering why they did not attack. Sometimes he thought he got one of them, when he fired at a burst of flame. It was probably just his imagination. He was certainly shooting in the dark. But he heard the death cry of an Arapahoe now and then—and still they did not charge. So long as they did not charge he knew he was keeping up a good bluff that the party was still within the rectangle of the wagons.

Yet they should come on. Tugwell would know how pitifully weak was the party. Tugwell would want to get it over before too much harm came to his property. Tom thought he heard the captain's voice urging them in.

He loosened the tomahawk and laid it beside him. He loaded all the rifles, taking a chance on a lull. He set his knife handy in the leggin from whence he had plucked it once that day. He waited, listening for the hammer of hoofs which would mean the end. He was determined now only to sell himself dearly.

A voice called softly in the darkness, "How ye doin' it, rooster?"

Tom sagged, choking. "Jib! Where the hell you been?

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THE lank form materialized at the wheel of Paddy's wagon. Jib was dressed in black clothing of some sort and even his beard was stained to match the night. He said, "I been around. They ain't charged yet, have they? I been fixin' a few of 'em."

"There's been hell to pay," said Tom.

"Reckon there has," agreed the mountain man. "Had a time with Slingshot's Arapahoes. They started sixty strong. Managed to kill half of 'em and hold 'em up a day or two. Sorta followed in the woods, pickin' off one to a time. Some got plumb discouraged and went home. Come down here, trailin' the rest, and Tugwell had started the ball. How come?"

"Slingshot rode ahead to make plans and told him about me," said Tom. "Then the lid was off."

"I been through 'em and among 'em," said Jib. He lifted his rifle, cocked it. He held quite still for a moment. Then he fired. Immediately a man screamed in pain. "One of Tugwell's teamsters," said Jib carelessly. "Showed himself agin the sky. . . . See you got the others out. Up on Sheep Rock?"

"You once said it could be held against an army," said Tom.

"Smart young-'un," said Jib approvingly. "Thought I heard a difference in the shootin'. So I come in."

"Why don't they charge?" demanded Tom. "They could take us with a charge."

Jib said, "They shore could. But they cain't understand losin' all those men. I been kinda busy. They are only about eight Injuns left."

"What?" demanded Tom. "There were twenty or more!"

"I said I'd been busy," muttered Jib. "Howsomever, they could still charge and git us. So let's start."

"For the Rock?" asked Tom.

"For them," said Jib succinctly. "Just keep close and do what ye think best, young-'un. Follow me!"

He slipped out from the wagons, as boldly as though going for a stroll. Tom gulped, grabbed his axe, rifle and pistol and ran to keep the long-striding mountain man in sight. A horseman came cautiously towards them, step by step, scouting the now silent wagons. Jib let him come, then made a quick leap, like a huge cat. The Indian came tumbling from the horse. Tom stepped in and split the shaven skull with one sharp blow of his tomahawk.

Jib grunted, "Shore is good to hev ye in a fight, Tom. Let's find Tugwell."

It was like hunting for a needle in a haystack, Tom thought. But Jib was patient, prowling the battlefield, listening, moving, pausing. Then suddenly they were near the brook, and Tugwell was speaking quite plainly on their right:

"Go in and get 'em. They've been wounded or they're ready to be taken."

Slingshot said surlily, "You go too!"

Sam Longman snarled, "I'll lead 'em. Bring the men here. Get them damned redskins to fan out. I'll take 'em in and kill that Peak greenhorn with my bare hands!"

Jib wheeled, stiffening. His long legs carried him into the rippling stream. The sound of the water covered their progress as Tom went along. The forms of the group came against the horizon, sitting their horses in a semi-circle. Jib went from the water.

Within sound of Tugwell's voice Jib seemed to lose his caution, his mountain arts. He was running now, straight for the thick body which loomed above the others. Tom fell behind, drawing his pistol. There was a moment when he feared Jib had lost his mind, was going to certain death, just to get hands on the man who had robbed him of his money and his girl.

Then Tom was snapping the revolver. He saw the remaining teamsters go down under his fire. Slingshot tried to ride away, but Tom caught the bridle of the cayuse and swung upward with his axe. He felt it bite home and dragged at the Arapahoe.

Slingshot came down screaming in pain, but jabbing with his long, dangerous knife. Tom sidestepped, holding onto the greasy wrist. He remembered the indignities he had suffered at the hands of this renegade, the suffering of the winter, the scene at Sheep Rock. He drove home the axe, again and again.

Slingshot gurgled and was still. Sam Longman was trying to manage his borrowed horse and get in a shot at the same time and was not succeeding. An Arapahoe came riding in curiosity and Tom shot him from his steed. Sam caught a glimpse of Tom in the flash of guns and came riding hard.

Tugwell was cursing and there was the sound of blows. Jib was getting in some licks, but Tugwell was twenty years younger and pounds heavier, Tom knew. Sam came, and Tom had to duck and jump aside. The rifle was almost in his face at that.

He threw his hand against the barrel deflecting the aim just as Sam pulled the trigger. Then he dropped and rolled in the dark, knowing the mountain man would have a revolver, knife and axe ready.

And now the other Indians, hearing the noise, were riding in. It was to be a charge after all, and even eight was too many against two. Jib was locked in mortal combat with Tugwell. Sam was cursing and searching for Tom.

Tom lay still, managing to reload his revolver. He had lost his rifle and his axe. He was weak and he could not tell whether Jib needed help or not. He heard Sam call:

"Captain! Have ye got him?"

Tugwell shouted, "Help! Over here!"

SAM WAS still on the horse, riding toward them. He would have the advantage of height if he could handle the Indian pony. Tom leveled his revolver. He fired once, twice. The pony stumbled.

Sam came wheeling, fuming, snapping his revolver. The Arapahoes were closing in, uttering little cries to apprise each other of their whereabouts, ready to make a circle and kill everyone within it.

There was really not a chance. Tom got on one knee and awaited the coming of Sam Longman, the mountain fighter who knew every trick. The breeze increased suddenly and a few stars poked out, and then they could see each other. Tom could see Jib and Tugwell threshing about on the grass near the water.

There was a fanfare of gunshot. There was a commotion in the rear and then Sam Longman was leaping in with the low thrust which had ripped the entrails from a grizzly in a time before now.

Tom had no time to think. He could only sidestep and fire his revolver. But Sam was not there. With uncanny quickness he had moved and was coming in behind Tom, rapping at Tom's gun hand. Then he tried to fire his own revolver.

Tom stepped and kicked. His toe caught the exploding weapon and it sailed away. He recovered his balance, found Sam swinging in with his knife again. Tom kicked once more.

Sam came back, doggedly, his teeth showing faintly. Tom weaved and met him. The knife slashed Tom's breeches, but he got inside Sam's attack and grabbed the knife wrist. Sam tried to get his toma-

hawk. Tom elbowed him, shoved him away.

Sam was quick, and as strong as a man thrice his stature. He rushed again, and Tom almost reluctantly belted out with his right fist, then closed with the knife.

The fist caught Sam on the jaw. He was not accustomed to bare hand fighting, and had no guard. He staggered and Tom's knife slipped into his breast and he muttered, "Kilt by a damn greenie!" Then he died, his head in the brook where Tom flung him as he ran towards Jib and Tugwell.

He had forgotten the Arapahoes. Now he wondered, casting a glance over his shoulder. He saw two rifles fire simultaneously from the direction of the wagons. He heard two Indians scream their death cries. A faint voice called, "Bedad and we're runnin' 'em, Stoney!"

Good old Paddy had returned! They were engaging the bewildered Indians, now leaderless. Tom went on. . . .

The two men struggled apart as he watched. Tugwell reached into his coat. Tom leaped, crying, "A hideout gun!"

But Jib Silt bent and seized Tugwell's ankles. Lifting suddenly, his powerful back straining, he threw the bigger man off balance. Tugwell fell backwards, into the little brook.

Jib jumped, drawing his knife. He struck once, twice. Blood spurted from Tugwell's throat. In the starlight his face was swollen from the beating. One arm was broken and dangling and his ankle twisted strangely.

Jib said, "I fit him mountain style. He never did aught but take our furs and give us whiskey. I give him some of his own, one last time. He's the last of 'em. The trade is finished. I couldn't let him live to plague the settlers or anyone else."

The Indians were fleeing. Paddy was coming forward, shouting loudly, "Tom? Where are ye, lad?"

Tom said, "We finished 'em. Sam is dead—I got Slingshot, too. I guess we licked 'em, thanks to you, Jib."

"Thanks to me, he sez!" laughed Jib. He was bleeding, Tom saw. Tugwell had put up a good fight. "He kills Slingshot and Sam Longman and thanks me!"

"Come along," begged Tom. "You're wounded. I want you to meet Norah and Paddy, and Norah will bandage you."

Jib Silt said, "Bandage me? A gal? Are ye mad, Tom?"

"You're scared," said Tom laughingly. "Come on—Paddy's calling me. Here we are, Paddy!"

Jib Silt's powerful hand shut down on Tom's wrist. He said wistfully, "Ye're a likely lad, and yer people will fight for ye, as we kin see. Ye helped me get Tugwell, and that's an end to many things. But I'm not fer seein' women since 'Thirty-nine, Tom. I'm fer the mountains, and never anything more. I'll be sayin' adios, sonny."

"No!" said Tom. "The trapping is over. You said so yourself. Come to Oregon with us."

"Ho!" said Jib Silt. "Ho! Ho! I'm fer the south, lad. Californy, where there's mountains never been touched, hardly. Grizzlies and cougar, they say. Be good and be sure to name yer first one arter me, eh, lad?"

The pressure increased until Tom's wrist hurt, then it was gone. The tall, lithe form leaped the brook, and Jib never even wasted a glance upon the broken, dead body of his foe as he went back to his mountains.

Paddy was calling, "What are ye doin' out here and who was that jist run away?"

"That was our army," Tom said. The emptiness in him would never be filled. It was a thing done, a thing not ever to be recaptured. The mountain men were dying and the last of them was going lighthearted on his way to the ultimate lonely end. "That was the man who licked the Arapahoes—and Captain Tugwell."

"A strange one he must be, to run off like that!" said Paddy. "Come, lad, Norah is worried to death about ye!"

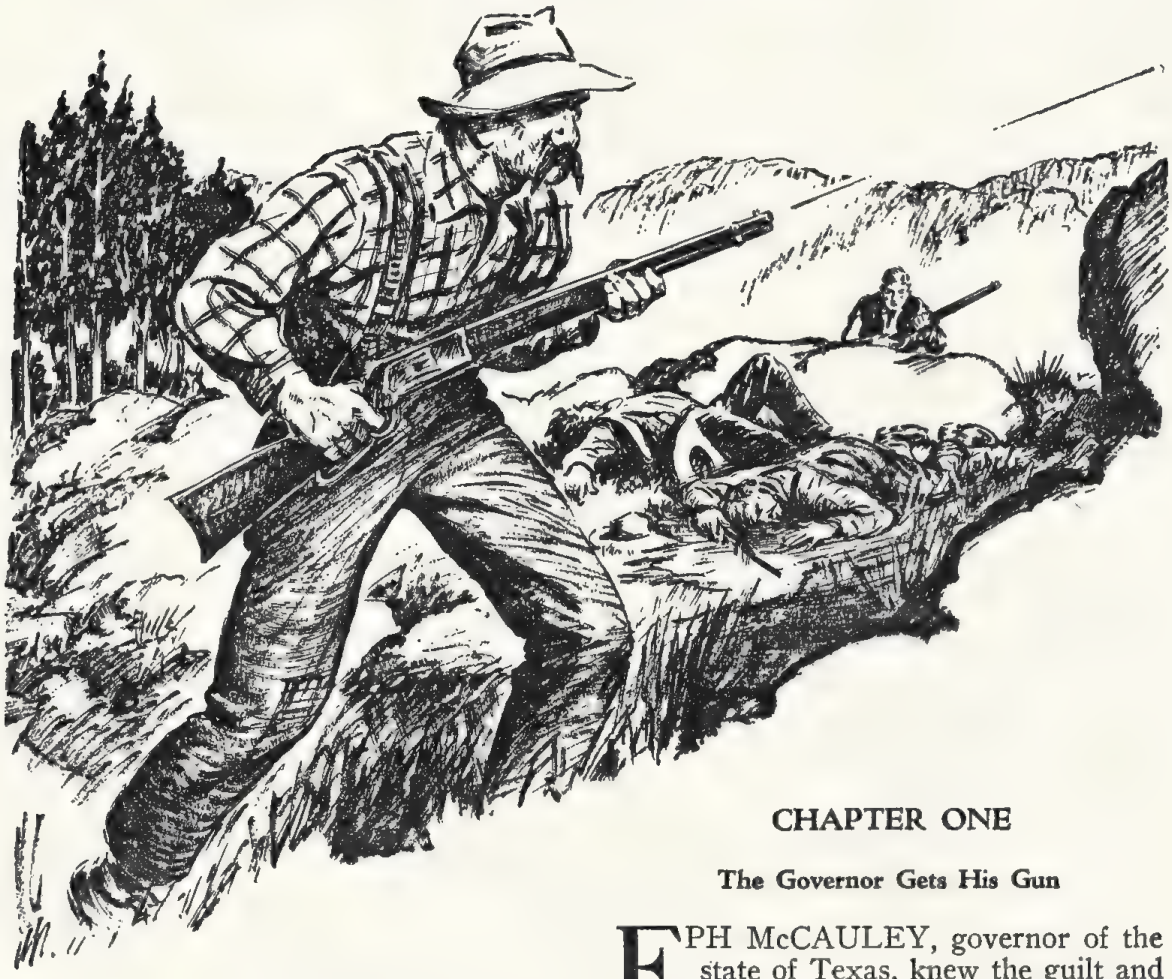
Yes. That was it. Norah, and the far country of Oregon. A farm, a family—part of the empire building which America must do to keep her borders clear. And the mountain man would be gone, into the fastness.

Tom went, his hand upon Paddy's brawny shoulder, suddenly very weary. Something had gone from his life. He had to build anew now. But it was something to look forward to. . . .

THE END

# Last Of The Fighting McCauleys

## By FRED GIPSON



**The Governor left his dignity back at the capitol when he went on that innocent-looking fishing trip—with a .30-30 hidden in his bedroll. For so long as a back-shooting Creech still ranged the Colorado banks, no McCauley was safe—whether he sat in the big chair at Austin or stilled corn-likker in the depths of the wild cedar brakes.**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### The Governor Gets His Gun

EPH McCAULEY, governor of the state of Texas, knew the guilt and nervous tension of an escaping criminal as he drove his buggy mare Bess out of Austin that morning. It took all the dignity that went with his office to drive down Congress Avenue with his fishing tackle sticking out all over his buggy.

It was bad enough to be leaving the capital when various members of the legislature were at each other's throats over important railroad matters. But the Governor felt that it might be worse if he didn't leave the impression that he was merely making another visit to his favorite catfish hole out on Barton Creek. He couldn't afford to raise any question

He was running up the slope, leveling and firing his rifle from his hip. . . .

about his destination. For buried down under his bedroll and camping paraphernalia were a .30-30 Winchester and two boxes of shells.

Governor Eph McCauley was on a manhunt.

It had taken the silvery-haired executive three days to realize a fundamental truth about himself: That, in spite of a long and successful political career, in spite of the dignity of his office, in spite of his broad and progressive views on matters of state, down underneath he was just another human being, subject to all the weaknesses of his kind. Specifically, after fifty years of civilized life east of the Colorado, he was still one of the feuding, moonshining, cedar-brake McCauleys from the west side of the river.

That fact, of course, was one that his mud-slinging opponents had failed to uncover during the previous election campaign. It hadn't even come to light when the Travis County sheriff had gone out into the cedar-brakes a month back and brought in young Knox McCauley for the murder of Aaron Creech. It hadn't occurred to anyone to associate an alleged backshooting, moonshining McCauley with the Governor of the Lone Star State.

Which hadn't surprised the Governor. After all, it had been better than sixty years since his mother—according to her parents—had made the mistake of marrying into the cedar-brake McCauley clan. He'd been only ten when she'd brought him back to the town-side of the river and begun his education for his career. There were few residents of Austin left to remember, if they'd ever known.

And out in the hills, who cared what happened to one town girl who'd never belonged? It was the killings between the Creeches and the McCauleys—that was what mattered, and that was what the cedar-brakers remembered. Right back to the day it started, while Texas was still a republic.

The Governor clucked to his mare and tried to remember how the thing had started. He'd been told, he knew, but that had been too long ago. A McCauley

had stolen a Creech woman. Or a Creech had stolen a McCauley hog. He wasn't certain. But retribution had been swift and terrible. Also the vengeance that followed. And now, some seventy-five years later, the old Creech-McCauley feud still held on, the fires smouldering for years sometimes, only to flare up suddenly in a new series of killings.

When the Governor had bothered to think about it at all, he'd thought that all the old hate and bitterness had been educated out of him. He'd thought that—up until the day the sheriff had brought in young Knox McCauley for trial, and newspapermen had dug up the details of the old feud and spread them across the front pages of the newspapers. That's when the Governor's faith in himself had been shaken. That's when his blood had begun to boil all over again.

A warm sun shone on the flower-strewn Texas prairie. A mockingbird sang in a pecan grove beside the river. Doves mourned in the mesquites. The clatter of the mare's hoofs was loud on the hardpan road leading toward the hills.

But the grim-lipped Governor, sitting stiffly in his red-wheeled buggy was not aware of these things. He'd slipped back fifty years. In his mind, he was already up in the hills. He was a dusty-footed, terrified ten-year-old, clinging to his weeping mother's skirts, stricken with horror at sight of his dead father lying on a wagon sheet in front of their hill cabin. Lying there with ugly holes in his chest, made by soft-nosed, heavy-caliber slugs that had entered from the back and mushroomed as they tore their way through.

Creech bullets, his Grandpa Mill-Wheel McCauley had said. And he'd said it with a look that told the kid to remember and prepare himself for the time when he was big enough to square the debt. And then old Grandpa Mill-Wheel had called the clan together with wild blasts on a twisted cow horn, and there'd been hell to pay in the cedar-brakes for a time.

The bitter hate that had flamed in the ten-year-old kid then was revived in the Governor now. It showed in his gray eyes, in the grim, determined set of his clean-shaven jaw, in the vise-like grip with which he clutched the buggy reins.

They crossed Barton Creek. The Governor didn't even glance toward his fishing hole. They had entered the hills proper when he pulled himself out of the renewed rage that gripped him.

He found himself shaken, his nerves on edge, and wished suddenly for a bottle of moonshine whiskey, like his Grandpa Mill-Wheel used to make. He swore under his breath.

He had to get hold of himself. A man in his position was a fool to let himself get into a killing rage. Especially over a thing that had happened fifty years ago.

"But damn them Creeches!" he broke out suddenly, using a tone of voice and form of speech he hadn't used since he was a kid. "Three of them ganging up on one McCauley. The last McCauley, at that!"

That's what the newspapers had said—Knox McCauley was the last of the McCauley clan.

He wasn't, of course. The Governor was a McCauley, and proud of it. But young Knox was the last of the cedar-brake McCauleys. Because back in that wild and broken country west of the Colorado, a man who'd been gone fifty years was an outsider. He might be governor of Texas; he might swing a political stick big enough to affect every citizen in the biggest state in the Union. But, as far as the hill clans were concerned, Knox McCauley was the last of the tribe. And now he was on the dodge, trying to escape serving a life sentence in Huntsville for killing Aaron Creech. Once he was caught and locked up, the old Creech-McCauley feud would be over.

With those long-geared, long-nosed, snuff-dipping Creeches the victors!

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THE Governor eased the mare up the first of a series of limestone benches that shook every timber in the light buggy. He swore at himself again. Dammit! Wasn't it time the old grudge and fighting were ended? Hadn't it been a state scandal how the old feud had held on, year after year, right here in the shadow of the capitol, so to speak? They'd brought the thing to court and settled it in a fair and impartial trial. What right had he, the Governor of Texas, coming out here with a Winchester

and interfering with the law. The law that he, of all people, was duty-bound to respect and uphold?

That, of course, was the same old argument he'd been using on himself from the moment he'd started reading the account of the trial in the newspapers.

There was nothing wrong with that argument. Only it didn't satisfy. It wasn't enough, not when a man got to thinking of those three lying, underhanded Creech snakes coming into town and swearing they'd seen a McCauley murder a Creech in cold blood. Claimed they'd seen young Knox back-shoot Aaron Creech and walk up and kick his body off a high bluff into the Colorado. Claimed the currents had sucked it under, where they couldn't find it. That likely the catfish were feeding on it right now. And then bragging outside the courtroom that they'd railroad the last of the murdering McCauley clan into the pen, or bust a gut trying.

The Governor hadn't interfered in the trial, of course. The evidence against young Knox had been damning. It was three Creeches against one McCauley, with the Creeches dragging Aaron's sniveling wife and seven ragged kids before a tired jury to cinch the verdict.

The jury had found young Knox guilty. An ambitious judge had thrown the book at the kid, hanging a life sentence on him.

Eph McCauley took a deep breath and set his jaw. All right, it had been a fair trial—fair and impartial as all hell! But it hadn't been justice. He was convinced of that. He'd known it the moment he'd got that one look at young Knox McCauley the day the sheriff was bringing his prisoner back to jail after the trial.

That one brief meeting had been enough to convince the Governor. Young Knox wasn't guilty of the crime they'd convicted him of. He was too young, too grave and steady of eye, too confident in his bearing. Even after they'd read the sentence to him, he still wasn't afraid. No McCauley with the bearing of old Grandpa Mill-Wheel and the confident strength of the Governor's dead father could be guilty of the treachery of which the Creech brothers accused him.

He might be tough. Hell, a man had to be tough to wrest a living out of those cedar-brakes where whiskey-making and charcoal burning were a man's only means of turning an honest dollar. Tough, and maybe a little wild. But not treacherous. If young Knox McCauley had killed Aaron Creech, he'd done it fair and square, facing the man he'd shot down. And all the fair and impartial trials a Texas court could dish out couldn't convince the Governor otherwise.

Well, the kid was free. He'd pulled a jail-break the night after they'd convicted him. He'd hung a sledge-hammer fist under a jailer's jawbone, used the man's gun to lock the sheriff and a deputy in his own cell, then pulled out under cover of darkness. Left a clean trail, too. Sheriff Hudlaw's trail-wise bloodhounds couldn't even find where the kid had swum the river.

The sheriff and his hounds and his posse were combing the twisting Colorado down toward Bastrop today. The sheriff had got word of a stolen skiff, and he figured the kid had pulled out downriver to put the hounds off his trail. He couldn't have gone upstream, the sheriff said. The current was too swift.

That's the way Sheriff Bryant Hudlaw had it figured. But the Governor would have bet good money that Hudlaw was off on a false lead.

Young Knox McCauley was right back up here in these hills, the way the Governor had it figured. Holed up in a secret cave where nobody but another McCauley could find him. The same cave every McCauley in trouble had used since the time a wounded catamount had got Grandpa Mill-Wheel hemmed up and forced him to climb a cliff that looked impossible to climb. Right there in that cave is where the Governor would find young Knox McCauley, holed up with plenty of grub and plenty of shells. Waiting his chance to deal out a brand of justice that had nothing to do with jack-leg lawyers and pot-bellied judges and law books so full of obscure phraseology that more books had to be written to interpret them.

Cedar-brake justice! That's the kind of justice young Knox would be waiting to deal out. The only brand of justice the Creeches could understand and appreciate.

Just what the Governor aimed to do when he located young Knox McCauley, he hadn't yet figured out. Maybe he'd talk the young cedar-braker into leaving the

county. Maybe not. It all depended on what hadn't come out at the trial and how bull-headed the last McCauley was.

As the Governor remembered the clan, the McCauleys were a mighty independent breed. They had good sound minds of their own and were slow to take advice.

It was late noon when the Governor came upon the spring. Clear cold water gushed out from under a mossy limestone ledge to one side of the road. A gnarled live oak shaded the spot and wild fern hung in long festoons from the cliff above. To one side was a grassy knoll where the mare could get good grazing. It was an ideal place to noon and rest the mare awhile.

The Governor swung his mare and staked her to graze. Then he found a comfortable boulder to lean his back against and sat down to eat the cold chicken lunch he'd brought along. When he'd finished, he leaned back against the slanting boulder to enjoy his pipe.

The Governor was tired, and the murmur of the spring was soothing to his ears. Wild bees came to suck water through the moss at the edge of the pool and made a soft humming sound.

Up in the live oak overhead the locusts whined drowsily. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### Cedar Brake Feudist

THE rattle and popping of iron-shod hoofs on the rocks brought the Governor up with a start. He hadn't intended to sleep, but he had. And the rider on the jaded, stumbling buckskin was almost upon him when he opened his eyes.

He came quickly to his feet, but the rider had piled out of the saddle now and was standing facing the Governor with a Winchester in the crook of his arm, a half-snarl baring his snuff-stained teeth.

"All right, brother," the rider said. "Me'n you're fixing to pull a hoss swap. Git the saddle off this crow-bait and set it on that mare of your'n."

A slow, burning wrath began to take the place of the Governor's first surprise. He'd recognized that voice, that high nasal twang with a certain overtone of belligerence in it. He took his time about answering and sized up the rider with a second look.

The man was long-geared and long-nosed, with long-pointed black mustaches drooping past the corners of a little thin-lipped squirrel mouth. His black hair was dirty and sweat-streaked and hung out over his collar in a shaggy mane. His black eyes were shifty and quick, full of crafty, animal-like cunning.

The Governor knew him, all right. His puckered blue eyes shifted to the buckskin. The lathered animal stood spraddle-legged and trembling, feet wide apart and braced. Sweat poured down the insides of the horse's legs in streams as big as a man's finger. The labored sucking of his lungs was an ugly thing to hear.

"You Creeches," accused the Governor, "were always hell on women and horses. You've ruined a good animal here!"

Quick surprise showed in the other's eyes and he snapped the Winchester around to point it at the Governor's belly.

"There'll always be plenty of good horses," the long-geared rider said through his nose. "And recognizing me as a Creech is something you're liable to regret, stranger. Git that-there mare saddled, like I said."

The Governor stepped toward the buckskin and jerked loose the cinch. "Thinking you'll ride that mare," he said dryly, "is something you're liable to regret, Creech."

The rider snorted contemptuously. "If you know us Creeches enough to recognize me," he bragged, "you oughta know we can ride ary critter that wears hair. git a move on, old man. I'll ride that mare, all right. I'll ride her right down to a whisper."

The wind-broke buckskin sat back on its haunches. The Governor had barely stripped the sun-cracked saddle off its back before the animal fell and lay kicking spasmodically, the whites of his eyes rolling up.

The Governor caught his mare and swung up the saddle. The spirited animal snorted and shied when the leather hit her back. The Governor pulled her down, soothing and patting her. Without looking around, he spoke grimly to the rider behind him.

"A man who'd run a horse off its feet like that ought to be hanged!"

Back in the direction from which the Creech rider had come, the bell-like voice of a trailing hound drifted across the ridges. The long-geared rider flung up his head and turned an ear toward the sound. Then he levered open the breech of his Winchster, made sure there was a cartridge in the shell bed, and snapped it shut. His high, whining voice was urgent and filled with threat when he answered.

"Old man," he said, "I may hang, and I may not. But if you don't dry up that jawing and set that saddle, you'll never live to find out. One more word out of you and I'll blow your backbone through your belly. And that-there's a promise."

He wasn't fooling the Governor. Eph McCauley knew what was coming. None of the Creeches he'd ever known would ride off, leaving a man alive to spread a tale of horse-stealing. He drew up the cinch and handed the reins to the Creech rider, bracing himself for what was to come.

The Creech rider's little mouth twisted in a faint grin as he took the reins. With the same hand, he reached and caught the cheek of the mare's bridle, pulling her head around to make sure she didn't get out from under him before he could get in the saddle. He hooked the wrist of the hand that held the Winchester around the saddle horn and chucked a boot into a stirrup. He rocked the saddle a little to see how the mare would take it. All the time, his cold, killer eyes held those of the Governor's, like a snake charming its prey.

The Governor felt something like a string of chill shot crawl up his backbone. He stood tense and waiting, meeting those deadly eyes with a hard cold stare.

Closer this time came the lonesome bay of the trailing hound. That seemed to be all that was needed to open the show.

The long rider went up into the saddle with deceptive speed. The Governor moved with him, snatching off his hat and whipping it at the mare's head. At the same time he flung himself sideways to get out of line with that threatening Winchester.

The rifle crashed with an ear-splitting roar. The Governor went down under the impact of heavy lead smashing across his ribs. The mare got rein slack and bogged her head, exploding like an unleashed thunderbolt.

The Governor had thought there was no man alive who could ride his bay mare Bess when she set her mind to unload him. But as he rolled to his feet and headed for the buggy at a staggering run, he realized the mare was whipped when she started. She was too frightened to get the job done right.

The Creech rider rode loose in the saddle. Daylight showed under him at every jump. But he kept his balance and he swung his long, saddle-warped legs like pendulums, slamming heavy cruel spurs into the mare's sides and bringing blood every lick. It was wild, savage riding, with the outlaw whipping the mare brutally with the long barrel of his rifle to knock the fight out of her.

They tore out down the rocky ravine, the mare pitching, stumbling, careening and bawling. The Governor dived for the back of the buggy. He got his hands on the butt of his Winchester, cursed hoarsely when the front sight caught in the bedroll.

The rider was almost in the cedars. He yanked the gun free and brought it to his shoulder. He snapped a quick shot at the swaying rider, knew he'd missed, and jacked another shell into the firing chamber. But now the mare and rider were gone, with only the rattle of the saddle and the popping of dead brush to indicate the direction.

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A SOB of futile rage tore at the Governor's throat. He took a wild glance around him, then started at a stumbling run up a sharp rocky slant that led to a high ridge above. If he hurried, he could maybe get another shot before the mare carried the horse thief out of gun-range.

Behind him, the wild eager bay of a hound resounded in the draw. The Governor glanced over his shoulder. A long-geared bloodhound with a bobbed tail came bounding down the opposite slope, following the dim road. The hound's tongue was out and he was drifting fast for a cold-trailing dog.

In the bottom of the ravine, the hound veered sharply. He swung toward the buckskin that still lay on its side, kicking feebly. The dog circled the fallen horse, bayed uncertainly a couple of times, then began ranging in wider circles. He even followed the Governor's trail a little way. Then suddenly, as if he'd finally made up his mind, he swung back, took the trail of the runaway bay mare and followed it, his eager trail cry rolling again.

The Governor staggered on up the hill. His breath came in ragged jerks, the pain in his side almost paralyzing his muscles He ran along the rimrock a little way, then threw himself, panting, down on his belly.

A tangle of cedar and tall live oaks stood close to the base of the cliff below him. But out yonder, a couple of hundred yards away, was a long gentle slope with little cover. Across that wide opening sped the bay mare. She'd quit her pitching now and was running wild, with the long hungry rider leaning over the horn and spurring her on.

The Governor sucked in a breath and held it, trying to line his sights on the moving target. Then he thought of the mare and lowered the muzzle of his gun. The Governor had never been too good a rifle shot, and now his eyes were weakening. If he hit anything, the chances were he'd down the mare. The Governor was a lover of good horses and, to his way of thinking, his buggy mare Bess was the best piece of horseflesh in the country.

The next moment, he was trying to line fuzzy sights on the running mare. He realized his duty now. No man who'd steal a horse and then attempt to murder the owner had a right to live and continue preying on society. Even if a good horse had to be sacrificed to get him.

Behind the Governor a loose slab of rock clinked against another. A voice ordered sharply: "Hang on, mister. Don't shoot that scissorbill!"

The Governor started and looked back over his shoulder.

Young Knox McCauley, ragged and sweaty, sat astride a mountain of a roan horse, looking curiously down at the Governor. He held a Winchester across the bow of his saddle, handy for immediate use.

The Governor sucked in a quick breath. Seeing young Knox astride that horse was almost as if he were seeing his own father again. Or the son he'd always dreamed about but never had.

Ragged and dirty as young Knox McCauley was, there was something clean about him, as if the dirt and rags were only temporary things that would be wiped away when the chance presented itself. That's the way Eph McCauley remembered his father. Young and clean and strong, with a spirit that dirt and rags could never hide. Tough and wild and lovable, with the same mop of unruly blond hair that stuck out from under young Knox's hat. The same strong voice. The same blue eyes. The same wide, generous mouth.

The Governor felt, rather than thought all this, at a glance. His mind snapped back to the present.

"But that horse thief's a Creech!" he exploded. "One of the clan that tried to send you to the pen. You're Knox McCauley. Why don't you want him shot?"

The boy's clear eyes searched the Governor from head to foot in one swift glance.

"Because," he said, "you're drawing a bead on the wrong Creech. That there's Aaron Creech, mister!"

"Aaron Creech?" said the Governor in a startled voice. "But it was Aaron Creech you murdered."

Young Knox McCauley grinned faintly. "Yeah," he admitted. "They done proved that in court. And what I got to prove is how bad them law ramrods can git bogged down in their law books and big words. I aim to drag that underhanded snake into Austin and throw him in the damn law's face. And I want him alive and kicking when I do it!"

Half stunned by this information, the Governor looked back over his shoulder. The bay mare and Aaron Creech were disappearing into the roughs beyond.

"But he'll get away!" he said savagely.

"No," said Knox McCauley with conviction. "He won't git away. You hear that hound, mister? That's a bloodhound. One of Sheriff Hudlaw's bloodhounds. Trained on runaway convicts, they tell me. Smarter'n a pole-pen full of foxes. Notice how he figured out that horse swap back

down yonder? Never lost more'n half a minute. That dog'll hang a trail from hell to breakfast, mister. He's been on that scissorbill's trail since before sun-up. He won't let him git away. Now who'n the hell are you?"

The Governor told him. The kid's eyes widened and he whistled through pearl-white teeth. "Well, I'll be dunked in a hog waller!" he marveled. "Now wouldn't that throw you. A cedar-brake McCauley, second cousin to the Governor of Texas. Here! Crawl up behind the saddle, Governor. Us McCauleys has got us a Creech to run down!"

## CHAPTER THREE

### "No Man Crowds A McCauley!"

THE Governor liked the easy way the kid accepted him as a kinsman and an ally. Eph McCauley's position as Governor didn't awe young Knox McCauley. He thought having a cousin of that caliber a good joke.

For the first time, the kid's eyes fell on the Governor's bloody shirt and he swung down, full of concern. "You hit bad, Cousin Eph?" he wanted to know.

"It's not bad," said the Governor. "It hurts like the devil and it's bleeding some, but I don't believe I'm injured much."

Knox McCauley pulled out the Governor's shirt-tail and lifted the bloody undershirt. He probed the wound with firm fingers. The Governor gasped.

"Nothing busted!" was the youngster's verdict. "Pull off that undershirt. We'll wash this wound out with a bottle of moonshine I've got in my saddle pocket. It'll stop the bleeding and maybeso poisoning!" He grinned and added, "The brand of cedar-brake moonshine the McCauleys put out'll damn nigh stop anything!"

The kid went to work. He washed the wound with the fiery whiskey, then bound it tightly.

"Now git some on the inside," he told the Governor. "Thataway, you'll forgit you're shot."

It was nearly the truth. The whiskey burned the Governor's throat and brought tears to his eyes, but it warmed his belly and stiffened his backbone. The kid turned up the bottle and downed a couple of fingers with all the ease of a man drinking branch water. He turned toward the big roan.

"All right," he said. "That hound's nearly out of hearing. We got to hump it!"

The Governor eyed the big wall-eyed roan dubiously. "You think he'll carry double?" he asked.

"Don't you worry about this tub-footed jug-head," the kid said, swinging up. "He looks like hell, but he's done run one horse off its feet today, and he ain't even worked up a lather yit. Climb up. He'll git us there and bring us back."

It wasn't the horse's stamina that had the Governor worried. It was the size of the creature, the mighty savage power and obvious fire in him. The Governor had resigned himself to a buggy ten years ago, and a horse like this frightened him a little.

Nevertheless, he stuck a foot in the stirrup the kid left hanging empty. He grasped the helping hand the kid held out for him. There was something about the kid that gave him courage and confidence. He had a momentary flash of memory of the time his daddy had lifted him behind the saddle on just such a big and savage horse, and the confidence he'd had in his father's ability to handle the unruly animal.

He swung up and settled himself on the flat muscles of the roan's rump. Hell! He was still a McCauley, wasn't he? A little old maybe, but still a McCauley. He grinned at the back of the kid's neck, childishly pleased at the thought. He didn't know when he'd felt the surging strength and courage this kid inspired in him.

Knox McCauley held the roan still and listened. When the faint far call of the bugling hound reached his ears, he swung the horse toward it.

"Hunt cover, you damn Creeches!" he bragged cockily. "Here comes us scrapping McCauleys!"

The horse moved off at a shambling mile-eating gallop that was surprisingly easy on the riders.

"Now I'll tell you how it was, Cousin Eph," the kid said as the roan hammered along. "Us McCauleys have been feudin'

with them mangy-hided Creeches from back before your time. But lately the smoke had died down. We was gittin' along peaceful enough, barring a fist-fight now and then over moonshine customers. Then pa, he gits him an idea. He hears tell how a man can make money hand-over-fist in the hair-goat business. A good lot of the McCauley holdings is brushed over with shin-oak. Pa's told how goat'll thrive on shinnery brush. So he sells his moonshine-making plunder and puts his money in goats. That's ten year back.

"Now them that tells you about this here easy goat money ain't in the goat business. Me'n pa wear our hands down to the bloody elbows cuttin' cedar posts and stays to build picket pens where the catamounts and wildcats and loafer wolves can't kill off all the increase. We hand-nurse little old blattin' kid goats what can't find no nanny to claim 'em. We doctor 'em for screw worms in the summer, and build warming fires around 'em in the winter.

"A man in the goat business don't need no bed. All he's got any use for is a lantern. Ma's working herself to death, helping out. It's rough going, and I want to quit. But pa, he says hell no. He says we're making a living and it's an honest one. He says he knows about one McCauley what's turned out to be a big man in the world, meaning you, I reckon. He claims I'll do the same or he'll tear my tail up with a doubled catch-rope every day till I've got my growth. He says if we'll just hang and rattle, we'll make the grade.

"Which we done. We don't git filthy rich, but we make a-plenty. Pa's threatenin' to spend some, sending me outside for schoolin'. Then him and ma take off a day to do some catfishing in the Colorado. They don't never come back.

"Maybe the Creeches bushwhacked 'em. Maybe they git their boat sucked under in a current and drown. Me, I don't know. All I know is that while I'm trying to locate what's happened to 'em, the Creeches start stealing me blind. I catch Aaron rustling a bunch of goats one day and shoot his horse out from under him. The next thing I know, Van and Cedar and Elvey Creech is leading Sheriff Hudlaw in here and arresting me for murder."

THE kid reached for his bottle and downed another drink, then handed it to the Governor. Eph McCauley found he could drink the forty-rod now without blinking an eye. So he hit the bottle twice. That pain had begun coming back in his side again and he laid his sudden thirst for cedar-brake moonshine to that.

"Them long-necked whickerbills," continued Knox McCauley, "figured it smart. I was the last of the cedar-brake McCauleys. If they could git me out of the way for all times, they could take over the goat business me'n pa and ma sweated blood to build up. Most of the hard work was done and all they'd have to do was drag in the profits. So they laid 'em a big egg and taken it to the law for help to git it hatched. They was playing a lead-pipe cinch, the way they had it figured. But I reckon we can show 'em where they made a miscalculation."

The Governor nodded and agreed. "We'll show 'em boy," he said. "Us McCauleys'll show 'em!"

The Governor realized then that he was a little drunk. But he didn't care. It was McCauley whiskey he was drinking and a fighting McCauley he was riding with. The Governor of Texas needed a little brave-maker to pull him over the hump and it was nobody's damned business if he talked with a loose tongue and too much emotion. He added, as an afterthought: "Us McCauleys'll show 'em, Cousin Knox!"

They rode silently for a little while, till the trail cry of the bloodhound floated back through the cedars.

"What I want to know," said Governor Eph McCauley, "is how you come to be trailing Aaron Creech with one of Hudlaw's bloodhounds."

Knox McCauley's laugh was a clear ringing sound in the cedar covered hills.

"Now I'll tell you about that hound, Cousin Eph. That old sonofagun's the sheriff's pet till they throwed me behind the bars. He kept hanging around the jail and growling at me every time he passes my cell. One day I offer him a hunk of meat I'd left on my plate. That breaks the ice. Me'n him shake hands and say our howdys. After that, we're thick and chummy as three in a bed."

"The night I pull my jailbreak, old Joe watches me land a haymaker under that jailer's jaw. That tickles him all over. That jailer don't like dogs and has cussed old Joe out from under foot every time the sheriff ain't around. When I quit town, old Joe sides me. He damn nigh plays out, swimming the Colorado and I give him a boost. That cinches the deal. He's mine for keeps then.

"The sheriff, now—I reckon he'd claim I stole old Joe. Which ain't the fact a'tall. To tell the truth, I don't reckon I could run old Joe off with a fist full of rocks. He just naturally throwed in with me. We're partners.

"This morning we sight Aaron Creech. I explain the facts to Joe. He gives his tail a twist and takes that trail like he knowed what tree he aimed to put him up."

Across the ridges, the lonesome bay of the bloodhound came back to them. The sound of it thrilled old Eph McCauley to the core. He'd been a hound man himself until he'd figured he was too old to follow the chase. Even yet, he kept a back yard full of hounds, useless creatures because they got little training.

"What," the Governor wanted to know, "keeps Aaron Creech from holing up somewhere and bushwhacking you and old Joe?"

"He tried that once this morning," said Knox McCauley. "It didn't work. Me, I'm on the watch for him to cut a monkeyshine like that and ride to one side of the trail, like I was when I run onto you. But it's that old hound that tips Aaron's hand. That dog's got more brains that a man could crowd into a wagon box. Wise as a tree full of owls, old Joe is.

"Seems like he can tell ahead of time when that slimy Creech is waiting for him with the hammer drawed back on his gun. Old Joe cuts for cover like he knowed what he was all about and circles, bawling his head off. That old long-eared, clabber-mouthed dog is a man-hunter from who laid the chunk!"

Sweat from the big roan's rump was seeping through the Governor's pants to mingle with the sweat from his own. He chuckled.

"That," he said, "calls for another drink. I'd say we ought to drink this one to old Joe. Old Joe, the best bloodhound that ever took a trail!"

Young Knox McCauley grinned. "And I'd say, Cousin Eph, you got the same failings as all us McCauleys. You got too big a hankering for cedar-brake moonshine whiskey."

He handed the bottle back to the Governor. "Make this'n short," he advised. "From the way old Joe's talking it up, we're gaining on that mare of your'n. She can't stand up to a hard run in the brakes like this old wring-tail roan. She ain't been raised in the cedars."

The Governor took this reprimand for what it was worth. He made this drink short and stuffed the bottle back into the saddle pockets, buckling down the flap.

"I'm not," he defended, "what you'd call a heavy drinker, Cousin Knox. But sometimes an old man has to use whiskey in the place of guts. I'll be on hand with my two-bits worth when you kick off the lid. You can depend on that."

"I ain't," said young Knox McCauley dryly, "criticizing the Governor of the state of Texas, Cousin Eph. I know the McCauleys. They'll stand hitched in a tight."

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GOVERNOR Eph McCauley wasn't sure whether he'd been praised or condemned, but he grinned delightedly. He wasn't a man to lose his head when he was drunk. He knew it wasn't cedar-brake whiskey that made him think his Cousin Knox McCauley was smart as a whip. He'd seen veteran senators in the capitol who couldn't have handled a like situation with more tact.

"Son," he said. "You got a head on those big shoulders of yours. When this deal's finished, I'm taking you back to Austin with me. You're young yet. If you'd try just a little, us McCauleys will have another governor ramrodding this old state before you're as old a man as I."

Young Knox McCauley turned his head, cocking a dubious eye on his elderly cousin. "You right sure, Cousin Eph," he said, "that ain't the cedar-brake whiskey talking?"

"All right," conceded the Governor. "That's cedar-brake whiskey talking. But

it ain't moonshine thinking. My tracks won't cover much ground out here in the cedar-brakes, but you'd be surprised at the size of them in the field of politics back at Austin."

Less than half a mile ahead, both saw at the same instant Aaron Creech spurring a jaded bay mare over a rise. Young Knox McCauley touched spurs to the roan for the first time and the huge animal surged forward.

"Maybe I'll give 'er a whirl," said the kid with a reckless grin. "Ramrodding hair-goats or people, it's all the same to a McCauley. Hang onto that Winchester. Aaron Creech is making it onto home ground. The show's liable to open any minute now. Just recollect one thing, Cousin Eph. We want Aaron Creech and we want him alive."

The sheer audacity of trying to take one of the Creech clan alive didn't bother the Governor any more. There was too much McCauley moonshine whiskey under his belt, too much hot McCauley blood in his veins. He clung to a saddle string with one hand and his Winchester with the other and the spirit of conquest was high within him.

If young Knox McCauley thought they could take Aaron Creech alive, then by hell, they'd take that slimy thing alive, and that was that!

One part of the Governor's mind told him that it was raw cedar-brake whiskey pumping such reckless courage into him. But the other part pointed out if it took McCauley whiskey to give him this high courage, then the law against moonshine of the McCauley brand was a mistake, and there ought to be legislation to take care of the matter.

Like Aaron Creech had done a couple of hours back, the Governor jacked open the breech of his Winchester, made sure there was a cartridge in the shell bed, then snapped it shut again.

"It don't matter," he said a little viciously, "if Aaron Creech gits shot up a little, does it, son?"

"Just so you don't kill him," said Knox McCauley.

"I won't kill him," said the Governor. "I'll just fix him so he'll wish he was dead. We'll teach him to crowd the McCauleys!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Tough to Kill!

THE roan tore through the cedars, his heavy hoofs hammering the loose rock beneath his feet. Governor Eph McCauley rode with a rising exultation, ducking and dodging the whipping branches of the cedars like a veteran of the cedar-brake country. But for the dignity of his office, he would have cut loose with that wild fighting yell he remembered old Grandpa Mill-Wheel using back in the days when he used to battle the Creeches.

Up ahead, they got a glimpse of the bloodhound Joe topping the rise. He bounded along, wringing his stub tail in joy of the chase, his resonant voice rolling and echoing in the neighboring canyons. Then the big roan was surging up the slope, seeming to gain speed on the climb instead of losing it.

They reached the crest of the hill and young Knox McCauley called out triumphantly: "Looky yonder!"

The Governor was already looking. The opposite slope was steep, made up of a series of broken limestone ledges and littered with loose rock. Halfway down that dangerous slope, was the mare Bess, pitching and bawling, stumbling and falling, then getting up and going at it again.

The Governor knew instantly what had happened. Back at the spring, he'd whipped his hat at Bess' head and frightened her. Then the crash of Aaron Creech's Winchester had put her into a panic. She hadn't used half the tricks in her bag back there before terror had set her to running.

But that terror was gone now. Aaron Creech had spurred it out of her. Now she was over the panic and was fighting mad. She'd picked her spot to suit her and was making a whirlwind second try at unloading her rider.

Young Knox McCauley had unconsciously hauled the big roan back on his hunkers, watching the show. The Governor slid off behind.

"Come on!" he shouted to his young cousin. "This is where we get him! The devil himself couldn't ride that mare when she sets her mind to throw him! I told

Aaron Creech he couldn't ride her, and he can't. She'll snap him loose from that saddle any minute now!"

The bawling mare was like a four-footed cyclone moving down the slope. Dust boiled around her. Brush snapped and rattled against leather. Rocks popped under flailing iron-shod hoofs. Sometimes the long-legged rider was behind the saddle, then again he was up in front. The outlaw was making the ride of his life down yonder on that rock bench slant, but the odds were too long, and the Governor knew it.

"Yonder he goes!" yelled the Governor. "Didn't I tell you!"

The fighting bay mare had made a long high leap off a bench, landed like a cat on the brink of another and snapped her body sideways as she made the second downward jump.

Aaron Creech had been sitting on her ribs when she'd landed that first jump. And when she'd whipped sideways for the second, his long body had shot away in a high arc. He landed out of sight behind a bench, as did the mare. The mare came into sight again, still bawling and pitching. But the man didn't.

Young Knox McCauley came down out of his saddle with a wide grin.

"Th'owed him clean out of sight," he exulted. "A jaybird could a-built a nest in his pockets before he hit the ground!"

Rifle in hand, the Governor was already headed down the slope. "Let's go get him," he said.

"Hold on, Cousin Eph," cautioned Knox McCauley. "You got to recollect that's a Creech down yonder. He may be knocked cold as a cucumber and then again he may be laying back of them rocks drawing a bead on us right now. Make you a tight nest in them boulders back of that cedar and keep me covered till I can circle for a little look-see. And remember—don't shoot at nothing but them mockingbird legs of his'n. I want him a-squallin and a-pleading when we drag him in by the hair of the head."

Young Knox McCauley had already taken cover and was creeping down the slant at an angle that would put him far to one side of the outlaw.

The Governor turned toward the boulders the kid had told him to hide behind, when the shattering report of a Winchester whipped through the canyon. A slug smashed into the Governor's rifle butt, splintering the wood. The Governor dived for the protection of the cedars, fear knotting his stomach muscles.

**SURE, WE'RE ON THE OFFENSIVE! But now, more than ever before, is the time to realize that it's always more costly to attack—in material and human lives—than it is to defend. And now more than ever our boys need the planes, the guns, and the bombs that your purchase of War Bonds helps to give them! Join the Third War-Loan Drive, and—Buy a War-Bond Every Pay-Day!**

Somewhere down the slope, the Governor heard his young Cousin Knox McCauley yell. He raised his head to peer out over the boulders, and the Creech rifle spoke again. The second bullet knocked white dust from a rock beside the Governor's face, whipped through the branches of the cedar and whined off across the ridge.

The Governor jerked his head back down. Before him was a narrow gap between two upright boulders. The gap was filled with a litter of sticks and dried prickly-pear pads that rats had dragged in. The Governor swapped ends with his Winchester and shoved the litter aside, then peered through the gap. He caught a glimpse of movement behind that ledge down there and poked the barrel of his rifle through. Then he waited.

Young Knox McCauley had told him to shoot at nothing except Aaron Creech's legs, and he reckoned he'd have to let the kid play out his hand like he wanted it. They could shoot Aaron Creech now and take him in and the Governor could clear the kid with that evidence. But if the kid had made up his mind to take the outlaw

into Austin alive, then he'd likely be sore as hell if somebody shot him first.

The Creech rifle crashed again, but this time no bullet came his way. Aaron Creech had evidently caught sight of the kid. The Governor peered closer and made out the crouching figure of the outlaw. He drew a bead on a cedar branch that screened the man's gun and cut loose with a long shot.

Lead spanged off steel. Aaron Creech yelled and came to his feet, running in a crouch along the ledge. The Governor had made a hit.

For the first time, young Knox McCauley's rifle rang out. But if he had a bead on one of those spindly Creech legs, he evidently missed.

There followed a long wait when the Governor had lost sight of the outlaw. He knew where young Knox's shot had come from, but now he could see no sign of the boy. Down past Aaron Creech the bloodhound Joe had taken cover and was baying frantically.

Seconds dragged on. The shadow of a sailing buzzard swept across the Governor's face and he started nervously, then swore at himself. He settled back, watching and waiting. The whiskey was dying in him now, leaving him nervous and jumpy. He glanced back at the roan, wishing he could get at that bottle for another nip.

The roan was standing with his head held high, staring off to the left. He nickered. A warning stab of fear shot through the Governor's body. There was something up yonder along that ridge. He didn't know what, but that roan knew.

He raised his head to peer along the ridge and at that same instant vicious silence-shattering rifle fire burst from the cedars along the rimrock.

Off down the slope, he heard a cry. He shot a glance in that direction and breath-taking fear clutched him. Young Knox McCauley had come up from behind a boulder and was stumbling around like a blind man. He still had his Winchester clutched in one hand, but he was making no effort to return the fire. The kid was bad hit.

The guns crashed again. The kid dropped his rifle, buckled at the knees and dropped out of sight.

LIKE a man in a horrible nightmare from which there is no escape, the Governor crouched there under the scraggly cedar and watched two long, lean men with droopy black mustaches step into sight along the rimrock. They were followed a moment later by a third who was their counterpart in every respect.

One of the three called in a high nasal voice. "It's me'n Cedar and Elvey. Aaron. We got the wolf pup. He's deader'n his ma'n pa when we sunk 'em in the river. We've cleaned out the last of the McCauleys!"

Down below, Aaron Creech was trying frantically to break into his brother Van's speech. "There's another'n up the benches yonder!" he shouted wildly.

There was. And it was another McCauley. He was an old man, not too good a shot with a rifle, but a cedar-brake, moonshining, fighting McCauley down to the last drop of blood in him.

The first shock of seeing his young kinsman cut down from behind by bushwhack rifles was gone now. In its place was a cold, deadly fury that nothing but gunsmoke could cool. He had his sights lined on Van Creech's belly and those sights weren't fuzzy this time. They were sharp and clear, as sharp and clear as Eph McCauley's memory of his father lying before their hill cabin, with his big chest torn out by Creech bullets.

He squeezed the trigger slowly, like his daddy taught him back yonder when he was a kid, fifty years ago. The rifle roared and bucked and the impact of its shattered butt against his shoulder sent a thrill coursing through his old body. He had the shell jacked out and his sights lined on Cedar Creech before Van hit the ground. He downed Cedar as the man whirled to confront this new menace. He was levering a new shell into the firing chamber when Aaron Creech's lead got him.

The bullet dipped into the heavy back muscle close up under his right shoulder blade and dipped out, missing the backbone. But the impact of it knocked him off his knees, momentarily paralyzing him. When he finally managed to drag himself up over a rock where he could see, Elvey Creech was fading into the cedars, his long

spindly legs reaching out like those of a frightened chaparral bird running down a sandy lane.

Lead cut at the Governor again from the Winchester in Aaron Creech's hands. The Governor didn't flinch. He was drawing a fine bead on the running Elvey and he didn't aim to get thrown off. He squeezed the trigger of his rifle a third time and knew he'd gotten Elvey Creech center. He could tell by the way the long-geared runner flung out his arms and legs as he went down.

Aaron Creech's rifle crashed again and the Governor's hat was whipped off his head with a rattle. Like a cornered wildcat then, the Governor wheeled to face the last of the Creeches.

Aaron Creech, either kill-crazy or certain of his victim, had come out in the open at last. He'd climbed up on the bench that had been protecting him and was running up the slope, levering and firing his rifle from the hip.

One of his bullets knocked the last of the rat-nest litter into the Governor's eyes, stinging his face and blinding him. And when the old man regained his sight, Aaron Creech was right on him, his upper lip peeled back from his long front teeth like a snarling beaver. In his eyes was a greenish glitter of hate, and the muzzle of the gun was so close that the Governor could look down the barrel.

The Governor was swinging his rifle into line but he knew the last of the Creeches had him dead to rights. This next shot would have his name written on it.

The whiplash report of a Winchester to his left slapped across the benches. Aaron Creech's body jerked and held rigid, with the muzzle of the rifle still in the Governor's face.

Then the gun dropped from nerveless hands and a look of incredulous surprise wiped the hate from Aaron Creech's narrow face. He drew up one foot as if to take another step, then pitched forward, burying that hatchet face in the litter that the Governor had shoved out of the crevice between the boulders.

Young Knox McCauley's voice called from down the slope to the left. "That there's the second time I've kilt Aaron Creech. An' I'll kill the slimy lizard again if he moves!"

The Governor reached up, caught hold of a boulder and pulled himself to his feet with a grunt. He blinked his puckered old eyes at the white, pain-filled face of young Knox McCauley sticking over a boulder. He looked down at the dead Aaron Creech and then back to his fighting cousin.

"I thought you were dead," he said slowly.

Young Knox managed a grin, but it was a weak one. "Yeah," he said. "And I thought I'd shoot that scissorbill through the legs. But look what happens: Them snake-bellied brothers of his'n crawl up on me from behind and shoot me in the legs. One's busted below the knee and the other's got a hole in it, high up big enough for that bloodhound Joe to run through. You reckon you can catch that roan and fetch me that whiskey bottle? I could sure do with a drink."

"If that roan even flinches enough to rattle that whiskey in the bottle," said the Governor grimly, "I'll put a rifle ball between his eyes. Us McCauleys can go a long ways on the brand of cedar-brake moonshine we drink."

"I hope," young Knox said dryly, "that roan don't git skittish. Right now, I don't feel up to riding that bay mare sawbones of your'n into town. How're we gonna straighten it out with the law this time I kilt Aaron Creech?"

"Us McCauley governors," said old Eph, approaching the roan cautiously, "has got ways to handle things like that. You wait till I get my hands on that bottle, then we'll talk it over. Whoa, Roan. Steady now. . . !"

THE END

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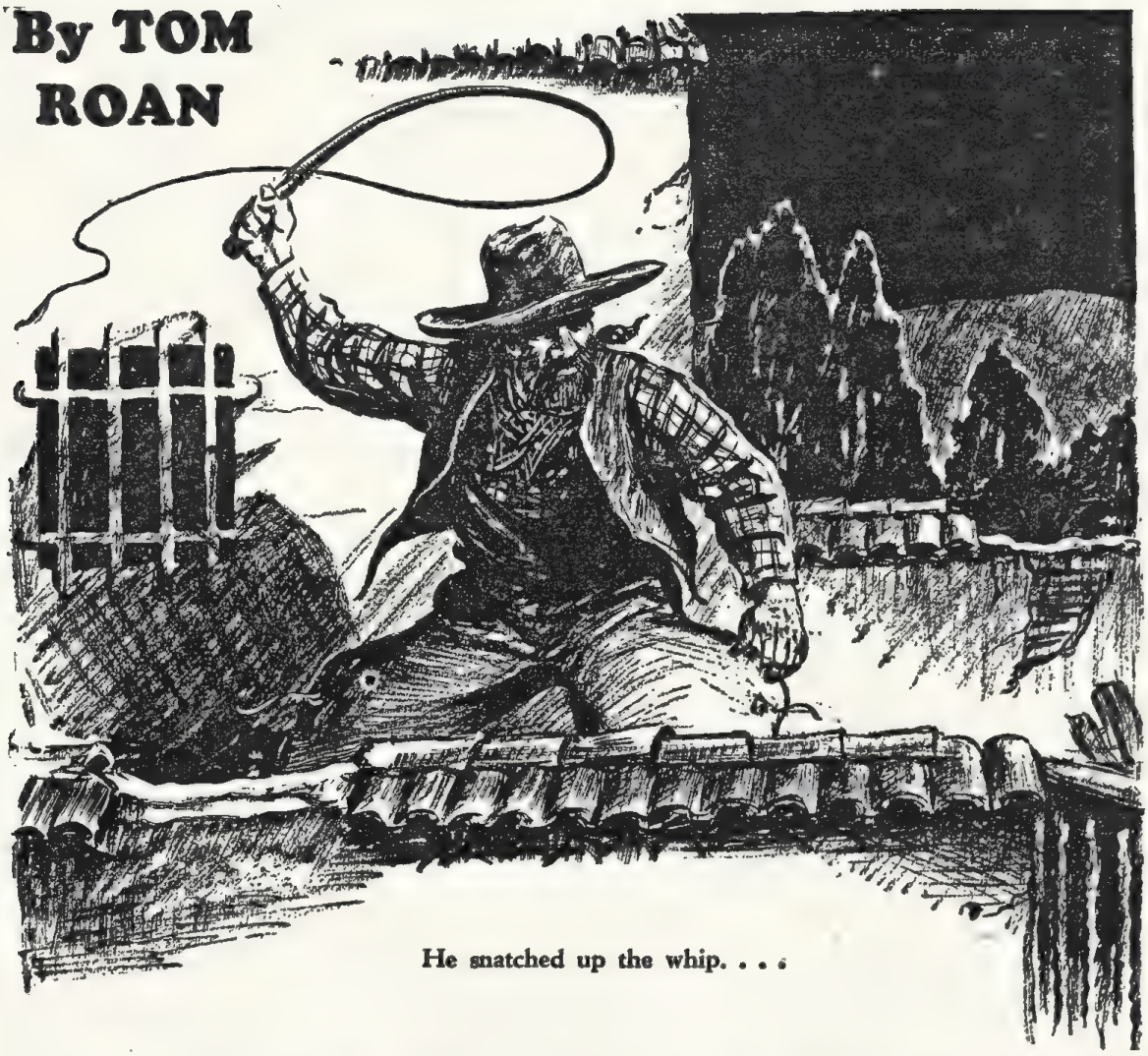
By TOM ROAN



He snatched up the whip. . . .

**It took just such a reckless old hell-bat as the famous Bullwhip Bill McCrackin to wade blindly into that odd-on gunfight on the Rio. . . . But even that battle-wise bullwhip man never guessed that the real fight would come later—in the mysterious castle below the Border, where once-strong men became the crawling slaves of the caballero who proudly claimed to be Satan's ramrod!**

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death on the Slope

OLD Bill McCrackin had a ringside seat at an attraction that was furious enough at times to make a man's eyes pop. Bullwhip coiled like a peaceful blacksnake around his shoulder, his battered gray figure sat perched on the top of the high bluffs west of the river while the tall old white horse, Gabriel's Trumpet, grazed in a little swale below, just a dozen rods behind him.

It was like watching a first-class fight from the top of the world. A thousand feet below, in a great gash sawed through the wild mountains was the river that marked the Border. Beyond it stood a vast sea of wind-burned hills, a ragged tip of Arizona, blazed now by a lowering sun. And on the slopes over there seven men were down.

Four of them were lying behind horses that had been shot from under them. The others had dropped out of their saddles and were clutched like lizards to hiding places in the sun-baked rocks. There

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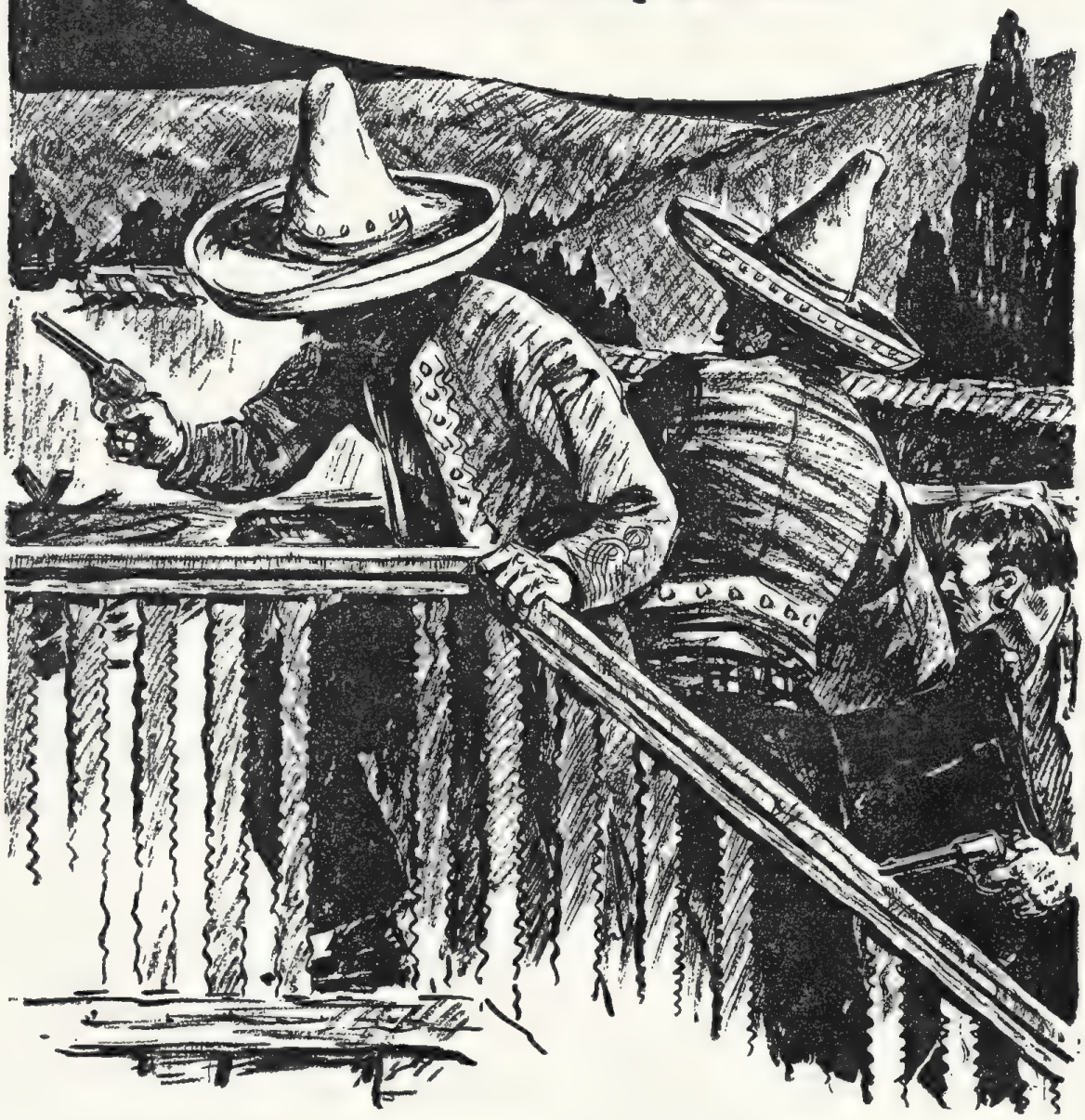

they'd make their hold-off fight, while four riders on sweat-slinging horses worked their way toward the river in a desperate attempt to lose themselves in the maze of tumbled hills south of the Border.

One of those riders approaching the river was a girl with flaming red hair and mounted on a long-bellied roan. Just behind her, white hair shining, slumped a sick-looking old man on a big bay. Two young riders trailed him; McCrackin had watched those two fight the rear guard action all the way down the slopes.

It was not going so well with the seven men trying to stage the hold-off. One of the three, lying on his belly in the rocks, ceased firing and turned over on his back with a few spasmodic twists. Bill McCrackin's keen old eyes saw that the fellow would not be rolling back to fight again.

Now another man over there, forted

up behind the body of his horse was buckling and twisting like somebody suddenly going crazy. He bridged his rigid body on his hands and feet from the ground, then slumped back as another bullet caught him. He started rolling, with puffs of dust spurting around him. At the lip of a steeper pitch of the slope he halted, then came rolling on, a limp lifeless bundle, bounding and wheeling until he was brought to a halt against a tall rock.

It was long past the time for those five survivors to make their dash if they ever intended to make it. McCrackin had not been able to see many of the men fighting them from above, among that wind-blown sea of holes and ledges. Those men up there had all the advantage.

Right now the worst was coming. McCrackin glanced around, and from both north and south a long string of riders cautiously worked their way down to the river. Once those two long lines of riders reached the river's edge, they would have the fighting men on the slope surrounded. When that happened, death or surrender would have to come in short order.

It was not old Bullwhip Bill McCrackin's fight. He did not have the slightest way of knowing who was right and who was wrong over there. The only thing he could see was that it was a big crowd against a little one. There were at least forty men in each string of those attacking riders. Five men to fight eighty —without even stopping to count those still above them—was too much for any man to swallow.

He took another look at the four riders below and saw that they were just getting down to the water's edge. In a few minutes they could cross the Border, but it would be impossible for the men doggedly holding on above them to know they were in the clear.

Old .45's dangling at his hips, McCrackin arose and reached for his rifle lying on a nearby rock. Right or wrong, it was time for a man to do something. He yelled a few times and waved his floppy old hat, but the men on the slope were too far away to hear him. Then he saw the riders below halt, saw the girl pointing upward at him.

The big, dark-haired fellow behind the old man started to swing up a rifle. The wiry tow-headed beside him caught it, thrusting it down.

"They're cuttin' yuh off!" McCrackin bellowed the warning down as loudly as he could yell, pointing to the south and then to the north.

The girl kept looking at him. Clamping on his hat, he pointed his rifle to southward and let go a shot. He fired then to northward, and the girl turned to the others as if she understood.

The tow-headed rider—one of the rear-guard fighters with the old man—was the game one. McCrackin saw him turn back as the other three pushed their horses on into the river to catch the three empty-saddled brutes belonging to the men on the slope. But it was not necessary for the tow-head to go on. One of the men behind a dead horse turned and saw McCrackin waving his big hat in the distance. Mistaking him for one of the others who had gone on to cross the Border, the man behind the horse started waving and yelling to the others.

Now the rush for the river was coming, made by those left on the slope—apparently friends of the man's party. It was a five-man race in a moment. They started charging blindly down the incline when one of them dropped his rifle and threw up his hands as a bullet caught him squarely in the back. Like a bird taking wing, he shot into space at the lip of a sudden drop-off. For a moment he was like a cross suspended in the air, then he was folding up, wheeling over, a smashing thing coming to the rocky earth. He struck, bounced, struck again, and slid to a lifeless stop with a pall of dust hanging over him like a brown shroud.

If the others saw the tragedy they did not stop. They were on a sharp point of the slope in a few moment where they could see up and down the river. One of them pointed northward. Another foolishly stumbled to a halt and yelled something as he jerked up a long left arm and waveringly pointed southward.

It was the last time that fellow would be senseless enough to stop to point with bullets cutting the air to ribbons around him. Even from the distance McCrackin thought he saw two puffs of dust jerk

from the man's clothing. He staggered, started to come on, and stopped again, reeling. Suddenly he was down, sliding face-forward for a few yards on the loose rocks before he came to a final halt, with bits of stone popping like buckshot around him as the bullets from above kept striking.

But the remaining three were making it. Dropping over another little bench they were out of immediate danger until they reached the tow-head. He swung one man up behind him. Then, with a man hanging to each stirrup leather, he came back down the slope toward the others waiting with the horses below.

That tow-head had guts! McCrackin saw him rear back in his saddle and wave his big black hat. The girl waved up at McCrackin a moment later, then they were taking to the water—not yet out of danger but going to get across that river in spite of hell!

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THE six men and the girl were soon out of sight, hidden by an overhang of the bluffs as they entered the mouth of a narrow cañon down there at the water's edge. The shooting high up on the slopes had died away. At least twenty men were up there, having broken their cover at last to stare below. Some of them lifted their rifles and shook them at McCrackin, standing in plain sight on his high perch but so far out of range they were not foolish enough to waste bullets at him.

By this time the two strings of riders who had swept down the slopes were getting dangerously close. Silver stars flashed on the vests of the lead riders both to northward and to southward. That meant law, and any lawman would know he had no business crossing the Border. But it was a certainty that those men had no intention of stopping merely because they were coming to the river. They were coming on, hell-bent to finish their job, even if it caused a break between the United States and Mexico!

McCrackin was still only a bystander. He had fired a shot in the general direction of each string of riders, but it had been only a gesture. Any fool could have seen that he was not actually shooting at them, but it was soon apparent that they had not forgotten the part he had played against them.

The men from the northward were the first to open fire on him, but the riders to the south were only a few seconds behind. Bullets came shrieking up, whistling through the air and slapping the rocks as McCrackin stepped back to put the lip of the bluffs between him and firing. There was only one chance in a thousand of getting struck, but the men high on the crest of the slopes were suddenly scurrying forward and taking the quick notion to open up on him.

It was another waste of lead. McCrackin ignored them and slipped to a place where he could look down through a crack to see what the two lines of horsemen were going to do, now that they had just about come to the end of their rope.

The fleeing riders were out of sight up the rough-walled little cañon, but the pursuing horsemen were scarcely hesitating. Led by the men with the stars on their chests, they were slopping on through the river with their rifles up and ready. For a moment McCrackin could hear the faint noise of the escaping hoofs ahead as they pounded along on a rocky ledge in the north wall that would bring them to the top.

Never long to make up his mind as to which side he would take, McCrackin sawed off his old hat and took another squint at the long slopes beyond the river. The men over there were getting closer in their mad scurrying to get to the river. A yell that was like a whisper went up as they saw him, and again they were opening fire. Having rapidly shortened their range they were close enough by this time for some of their bullets to whistle along the top of the bluffs.

McCrackin dropped to his hands and knees. He took one more peek at the men below. It was a regular mob, growing by the second, in the mouth of the cañon now, and it was time to let them know which side of the war he was on. McCrackin grinned as he gave them his first sample of the uncomfortable things that were to come, unless they turned back.

There were rocks here of all sizes and shapes; tons of them scattered along the

rim. As the first shot, he dropped flat on his back and gave one a shove with both feet. It was almost round, and weighed at least five hundred pounds. It tilted, gravel under it sliding and rolling as it teetered out into space. Down it shot, striking a brittle shelf to break into a dozen pieces and start other loose rock spilling like a roaring, rumbling waterfall behind it.

This was only the beginner, the threat. It was a spill that came smashing and tearing down, rods ahead of the leading riders, but it was enough to make them wheel their horses and start a mad jolt backward as yells of sudden terror came up like a furious wail.

McCrackin yelled back at them just for the mean old hell of it, and sent another big rock sliding out into space. He did not bother to look for results until he had sent a third and fourth stone spinning and shattering down the face of the rocks.

Confusion reigned below. The riders had jammed forward so rapidly it was almost impossible for them to turn. Only a light rain of splattering gravel had reached the men, but they were all throwing a crazy fit with their horses rearing and snorting. The men in the lead had been frightened, and had whirled so rapidly that they had started a general jam.

Horses went down, sideswiped off their feet or knocked sprawling by fighting hoofs. One wild-eyed black brute standing on his hindfeet pawed a man out of his saddle and sent him slumping under his horse's belly in the cloud of dust. Other crazy brutes were trying to rise in furious jumps and go racing over men and horses alike, back to the river.

McCrackin was still out of sight from the men on the slopes over there. He gave another round stone a push, saw it go out into space within a few feet of where he had sent the others tumbling down, and took another look-see.

The confusion below was unchanged. Right from the start it had soared to the highest pitch terror could take it. The men nearest the river had been like addled apes. As a herd of cattle jams up in a storm, to push the leaders over a cliff, so they had come on, making it worse and worse. Just now they were beginning to realize what they were doing, and were desperately backing their horses to find room to turn them and give the others a chance to flee from their trap.

McCrackin kicked down two more stones, this time a little closer to all the hullabaloo. The last one was his parting shot. No one had to tell him that. Every man and horse down there was so thoroughly terrorized they would not stop until they reached the safety of the other side of the river to seek shelter there. One man could hold a cockeyed army at bay from this spot by merely kicking down a few stones now and then.

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HE AROSE cautiously and took another look at the slopes across the river. The men who had been hurrying forward had come to an amazed halt. They had not yet reached a point where they could look down on the river, but they could see across it and were bug-eyed at the sight of the general disaster that seemed to be taking place in the mouth of the cañon. The dust that had been left behind was still a fearsome looking cloud down there. No stone large enough to kill a lizard had struck a single rider, but to those staring at it from the distance it must have looked as if hundreds of tons of rocks had been sent spilling down from the north wall to bury dozens of men under its crushing flood.

Now the time was just about ripe to give those monkeys on the slopes their high-tail medicine. McCrackin dragged his old rifle forward. In a moment he was opening up. He fired four quick shots with the rifle, just to kick up the dust and shatter slivers of shale over there, then, dropping the rifle, he whipped out his old .45's, thumbing his hammers and pulling the triggers so rapidly it must have sounded as if five or six men were suddenly opening fire on the slopes.

That marked the beginning of a general stampede. The men on the slopes scattered like swarms of gophers fleeing from a grizzly suddenly appearing among them. Half of them dropped their rifles. Bullets from McCrackin's rifle had splattered two or three of them with shattered bits of

stone. The lead from his .45's were spent and dropped harmlessly, before they reached them.

But some of the men over there on the slopes slipped and fell. Two of them came down heavily, one lying still with all the wind knocked out of him. The other was dazed by his fall and slow to get up. The sight of one man lying sprawled on his face without moving a muscle and another painfully trying to rise, was enough to make the others believe that hot lead was striking them down. It turned into a yelling stampede up there with every man for himself and not giving a hang about the rest.

It was also a stampede that took root in all directions. The horsemen who had flung back across the river heard it. Robbed of their wits by what they thought was a narrow escape from death when the stones started raining down, it took only the alarming sounds of the shots and the furious yellings on the slopes to start them fleeing up and down the river as fast as their winded horses could go.

McCrackin eased back and grinned, as happy as an old king 'coon that had just played a mean trick on a gang of noisy dogs. He had no way of exactly knowing what had become of the red-haired girl and the six men. After all, he reckoned, it was none of his business. They would be in the clear long before this time and probably going on, putting as much distance between them and the river as they could.

Those wild-eyed monkeys on the slopes and fleeing up and down the river had had their fill of it for the time being. If they dared to stage a come-back it would be hours before they could bolster up enough courage to try it. They would probably pick spots a few miles up or down the river where there was less chance of somebody rolling stones out into space to drop them on their heads.

It was all over, and something to be forgotten as far as McCrackin was concerned. He had not come into Mexico to hook up with a batch of trouble—a man could always find enough of that by doing his dangdest to keep out of it. He was drifting southward, keeping close to the Border.

Among these sleepy-looking hills and cañons, he had friends that had their fits of flying into unlimited violence at the drop of a hat. Once a man came here he always wanted to come back with the slightest excuse.

Keeping down, so that the men still fleeing on the distant slopes would never know that only one man had put them to inglorious flight, he started back toward the rim of the little swale that had hidden old Gabriel's Trumpet. Then the old horse was before him, the little stream trickling from the spring in the rocks. His saddle lay in the grass a few yards away, and there was a cold snack in one of his saddle bags. He was thinking of that snack when he stepped out of the brush and glanced to the right. He jerked to a halt with a grunt of surprise.

Bright sunlight flashing down the long barrel of a silver-mounted .45 Colt could sometimes be as blinding as a flash of powder in a dark room. He blinked owlishly. For a second it looked as if the heavy six-shooter was suspended in mid-air between him and the little spring. Then a man took quick shape behind the weapon.

"Drop that rifle—and reach!" ordered a voice. "Quick about it, *gringo,* or I'll blow your belly loose from your backbone and kick what's left of your old carcass over the rim behind you!"

## CHAPTER TWO

### King's Domain

THE man behind the six-shooter was somewhere around forty, a towering bull as far as men of ordinary size were concerned. His hair was rusty-red. His garb branded him a swell-head, a king of all dudes McCrackin had ever seen in all his travels. His gaudiness was enough to knock a man down. The edges of the soles of his fine boots were beaded with silver. In his shirt and vest flashed more color than one usually could find in an entire *fiesta.* A great sombrero sat on the back of his head. His whole get-up was Spanish of the old school, from elaborately braided and bell-bottomed blue velvet trousers and a scarlet vest worked with flowers of a score of hues.

This fine bird might be king of dudes,

but he was something else when one looked at his face. He had been handsome once in a brutal way, but a bitter evil shone in his goldlike eyes and the chilling end of the scarred nose and mouth. It looked as if a close charge of buckshot, fired years ago had all but carried the nose and mouth away.

"That's sensible," he nodded when McCrackin let the rifle drop in the grass, then slowly lifted his hands. "It will save a little trouble. Take his guns and shake him down, Señor Keener."

"Sure, now!" chuckled a voice behind the man. "With a whole heap of pleasure, Don Pancho."

It was a man of all the breeds and cross-breeds who now stepped from his place of hiding in the tall rocks just above the spring. He was so tall and lean a puff of wind might have blown him away. He was smoky-dark of face, garbed in dead-black, and his features were sharper than a blade. An evil customer whose age could have been anywhere from forty to sixty, came forward, holstering a blue-steel six-shooter at either hip.

McCrackin was disarmed and thoroughly searched. For a moment it looked as if the man would take the shiny bull-whip from his shoulder and throw it away. The king of dudes stopped him.

"Don't bother yourself with it, *amigo,*" he ordered. "Maybe he will want it to hang himself with before I am through with him. Put his belts and guns on your saddle. Good fighting tools are things never to throw away. Saddle your horse, stranger, but mind the way you move. We've looked over your riding-gear and know there are no weapons there, but if you make one false step—well," he almost laughed, "the sligthest pull of my finger will send you pitching feet-first and straight for hell."

"Yo're the doctor, brother." McCrackin grinned as he lowered his hands. "I'm one of them kind yuh don't have to do a lot of kickin' at to make me keep in line. Yuh don't need to hit me." His grin broadened. "Just pinch me a little an' I go calm."

He saddled Gabriel's Trumpet while the thin man moved away in the rocks and soon returned leading two horses. One did not have to make the slightest guess as to their ownership. One was a tall, high-headed rack of bones, as dead-black as the thin man's garb. The other was a magnificent animal, a long-bellied, racy pinto whose enormous saddle with all its fine trimmings would have made a circus king's eyes blaze from the sheer glory of such a turn-out.

Talk would come when they were ready for it, McCrackin guessed. At a nod he piled himself aboard Gabriel's Trumpet and settled down in his battered and half-ragged old Mexican saddle that looked like a sick buzzard alongside of a gay cockatoo when one compared it to the massive rocking chair of a thing on the pinto.

Keener swung into his saddle with his rack-of-bone black scarcely moving out of his tracks. Don Pancho's pinto was a frisky devil. He reared and snorted as his master swung up. Don Pancho steeled him unmercifully with his gold and silvered spurs, and then brought a cruel Spanish quirt slashing a furious blow down across the horse's hips.

McCrackin had not seen the other men until now. There were four of them who had been waiting in the brush along the rocky rim on the west side of the swale. They were all mounted, a dangerous looking lot and armed like bandit raiders ready to pillage a town. In addition to a six-shooter at either hip, each man carried a rifle and shoulder belts of cartridges criss-crossed on his chest.

As they rode away with McCrackin between them another surprise was in store for him. He had been wondering what had become of the six men and the girl who had made their escape up the cañon. They were in sight by the time Don Pancho and his little crowd had gone a mile.

At least twenty men were ahead now and waiting at a water hole surrounded by old trees in a bowl-shaped little valley that was the head of the cañon. At once it was certain that the girl and the men with her had been made prisoners. They had dismounted, and the girl was wiping the gray-haired man's face with a wet cloth. The heavily armed riders around them leaned forward in their saddles, cigarettes hanging from their mouths.

McCrackin stole a glance at Don Pan-

cho. Pancho, he reckoned, could be Spanish. The true Spanish, he had heard, were blond and often very blue-eyed, but this bird with his ungodly face looked like a devil-stomping Irisher. It was no surprise when McCrackin heard him called by a last name that smacked of Irish all over thunderation.

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WHEN they were getting close to the people at the water hole McCrackin could see that the blood on the gray-haired man's right shoulder. The girl had managed to get a crude dressing on it, but the man looked ready to keel over at any second. But his face turning red and he reared to his feet in spite of the girl's attempt to stop him, when Don Pancho and his crowd rode up.

"What's the meaning of this, Obreon?" he cried, and McCrackin knew at once that the old man and the girl were Spanish. "We're driven away from our mine across the river, and when we come up the trail we're set upon by this gang with guns covering us all around. They robbed us of our weapons. They said they were acting under your orders."

*"Buen' tarde, Señorita* Castelar." Don Pancho had dropped out of his saddle and lifted his fine hat to the girl with a grand flourish. His attitude was one of sudden harshness when he faced the old man to answer him. "Don Miguel," he growled, "all men take orders from Don Pancho Obreon for many miles up and down the river, and for quite a distance inland, if you would care to know. You are a criminal, my once-good friend, who fled for your life. And, I suppose," he shrugged, "you came rushing to me for protection."

"Obreon, I am an old man." Castelar put his left hand on the girl's shoulder to steady himself. "I can't fight you, but I must tell you that you are a liar. We are not criminals. We are victims of circumstances over which we have no control. The men who ganged up on my place this morning did not come to arrest us. They came to destroy us. Any number of my honest men are dead behind us. We came here because it was the nearest way of escape."

"And," nodded Obreon, smiling crookedly, "if I were to decide to toss you back across the river, then señor, they would most surely finish the job, no?"

"You wouldn't dare to be that kind of a dog!" ripped in the girl with her blue eyes sparkling like hot metal. "Even the lowest wretch riding for you would hate you and know you as a coward, in spite of all the great show you make of yourself. This land on which we stand is yet rightfully our land. Many generations of the Castelars were here—"

"Wait!" Obreon threw up his hand commandingly, eyes suddenly burning. "I am in no mood, señorita, to listen to the usual Castelar ravings. I, Don Pancho Obreon," he slapped his chest proudly, "now own the land as far as the eye can see. I am the king here, and you will respect me as such. Beggars should not whine and complain when they come knocking at a gentleman's door. All right!" He snapped his fingers as he turned back to his horse. *"Vamanos!"*

He wheeled back to stab out his arm and point his finger at the old man like the barrel of a gun. "I warn you, Don Miguel, I am a man who can be moved to deadly decisions on the spur of the moment. With just a little unruliness on your part—well," he shrugged again—"I will certainly see that you are delivered to the human wolves. Your man here," he nodded toward McCrackin, "did a most excellent job of driving them back by pushing a few stones over the bluffs."

"But—but," exclaimed the girl, staring at McCrackin, "he is not one of ours."

"Indeed, my dear?" smirked Obreon as he wheeled and flung himself back in his saddle. "Without a doubt you would have some hidden motive for denying him, but," he kissed the tips of his fingers mockingly at her, "a black Castelar lie just the same—and from such a pretty, pretty little mouth. Let us ride, amigos!"

## CHAPTER THREE

### One Chance in a Thousand

DESPERATE notions jarred through McCrackin's old brain any number of times as they rode on. Don Pancho Obreon rode within two

feet of his right hand. With one quick move McCrackin could have seized the fine six-shooter from its silver-inlaid holster at the man's left hip. By ramming it against Obreon's ribs, he could have had something to say about this business of being herded along like a sheep.

But something told him to wait. Obreon had believed what the girl had said, in spite of his calling her a liar. A smooth-tongued article when he wanted to be, he started questioning McCrackin. It was merely veiled questions in light remarks at first, but it grew stronger. By the time they had ridden four miles Obreon was blunt enough about it, and the tone of his voice told of a temper that could be dangerous and deadly when aroused.

"You have been across the Border less than a week you say?" he all but sneered in McCrackin's face. "Yet, amigo, you say you know quite a bit of Mexico. I have watched your face and eyes. When some of the men speak in Spanish you know the tongue very well. Perhaps, amigo, you are what is known as a spy, no?"

"Spyin' for *whut?*" demanded McCrackin, flatly. "Ain't no trouble between the United States an' Mexico. Ain't no wars goin' on here that anybody's done told me about."

"There will always be stool-pigeons!" Obreon swerved his horse a couple more feet away and looked at him with a wicked glint in his eyes. "There are things the law would like to know up and down both sides of the Border."

McCrackin grinned. It was his turn now to do a little lying and acting. "But —but I ain't wanted on this side. Leastwise, not yet!"

"Then," Obreon's eyes narrowed, "perhaps you are wanted on the other, hombre? Perhaps you have a reward behind you, no?"

"Just a rope, maybe," McCrackin's grin broadened. "Too danged cheap to put up money in the two-bit Montana town on the Yellowstone where I come from. They passed the hat one time to get a rustler brought back from Wyomin'. They didn't get seven dollars, an' the sheriff down there wanted five hundred. If somebody down here happened to come along needin' a good man—well, I'm it. I see better at night than a hoot-owl, an' I ain't ever been accused of leakin' all I know at the mouth."

It was a bid to see what Obreon would say, and Obreon did the smart thing by keeping his mouth shut and swinging still farther away to think things out for himself.

After leaving the little valley they had been climbing steadily, and the hills were wild and dangerous now. When they reached the sharp crest of a dry ridge blown by a hot wind, the country ahead dropped and lifted away endlessly. Deep valleys lay at the foot of towering slopes and were dotted with cattle and water holes or a stream ribboning away here and there.

They swung to the right now, going northward along the back of the ridge until it flattened into a tall tableland six or seven miles across. From time to time McCrackin had noticed lone horsemen standing like hawks on distant peaks in almost any direction one cared to look. Don Pancho evidently lived in constant fear of trouble.

A great palisade of fantastically colored rock several hundred feet high now loomed on the flat ahead. It was like an enormous cone with the top knocked off to leave it a towering round flat at least two miles across. When they came to it they entered a ragged crack, where a barefooted Mexican youth opened a tall gate.

The unexpected was at hand now, for the cone-like rock was hollow! It was like entering the pit of an ancient volcano. A broad lake, hundreds of feet deep, in the center lay in the middle of it and was rimmed with giant old trees. But the thing that held McCrackin's stare was the place that Don Pancho Obreon had called the *casta.*

It was a castle, and nothing short of it. It stood on a great square mass of stone three hundred feet tall on the north side of the lake, covering at least four acres of ground and as high-walled with stone and adobe as an ancient city. Somebody, McCrackin reckoned, had had a lot of hodgepodge ideas, and a good many barrels of money to spend here. It was unlike aynthing he had ever seen in Mexico. Tall minarets and time-mellowed old tow-

ers lifted skyward in a score of places inside the walls. The walls themselves were graced here and there with smaller round shapes that might have been the towers for ancient archers to stand and shoot their arrows against some siege in the far, far past.

A barefooted old man with a long white beard and clad in cheap cotton opened the gate for them in the south wall. McCrackin saw him bow to Don Miguel Castelar and the girl who were now in the lead. The sight of them must have stirred memories in the foggy old head. McCrackin saw the dark eyes under their shaggy brows widen and brighten for just an instant before the gray-beard lowered his head humbly. Then they were inside, hoofs clattering noisily on the flagstoned courtyard.

The terrifically unexpected happened just as the horses were brought to a halt in a big courtyard in front of an enormous doorway looking into a wide, black-beamed hallway. Something popped like an exploding firecracker beyond a stout gate of unpainted planking to their right. Aheels of the pop arose a shriek of pain that was as blood-curdling as the scream of a mountain lion suddenly striking one in the face in the middle of a black night. A wailing voice in Spanish followed:

"No, señor! No, for God's sake, I beg you on my knees! I beg you. I am very old. The pain is more than I can bear! No, no, señor!"

"I vill learn you!" A string of oaths in broken English followed. "I vill vip you to death right here in front of yore old voman und the rest of this pop-eyed people. *Ja! Ja!*"

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THE popping sound came again, fiercer than before. The terrible cry and a wild rush of feet followed. A white-haired old Mexican came crashing through the gate, almost tearing it off its big wooden hinges as he struck it to throw it open. Right behind him, head lowered like a charging bull, raced a powerful gringo, a devil of a big fellow of fifty with kinky blond hair short-clipped on a bullet-shaped skull.

"*Ja,* you vould run avay, hey?" cried the blond, little-pig blue eyes hot with uncontrollable rage. "Vell, I vill show you vot Adolph can do, *ja!*"

In his right hand was a whip, one at least five feet longer and even heavier than McCrackin's old twenty-foot blacksnake. He sent it slithering forward, the long end of it slapping around the fleeing man's bare feet and ankles. A jerk snatched the scurrying feet from under the old man. He came smashing down, flat on his face in a thudding blow hard enough to kill a man.

"I vill learn him, Don Pancho!" The white man was raging like a maniac as he gave his whip a couple of quick rolls and snatched it free. "Again I caught 'im stealin' your good vine, und again I take mine vip to him, *ja.*"

He sailed the whip forward again. The girl screamed and flung herself out of her saddle to rush forward. The whip had struck a long, hard slash down the bloody back of the old man, but it did not bring so much as a shiver from the limp thing on the stones.

"You've killed him!" screamed the girl. "O! *O!* It's poor old Ramón!" She dropped to her knees, sobbing as she tenderly tried to turn the man over on his back. "Ramón Chacon would not harm a spider. This—this is murder! Look at the cuts on that poor old back. I could kill you, you thick-skulled dog!" She whirled on the man with the whip now and started for him with a rush. "I'll tear those mean little eyes out of your head and throw them in your face!"

The bullish blond had already coiled his whip and was crouching there, heavy hands swinging apishly. "*Ja,* you try und I vill vip you!"

It looked like he might start to do just that, but his courage failed him at the last second. Suddenly wheeling, he beat the girl to the gate and jerked it closed behind him. The girl struck it with all her weight, and stood there hammering on it furiously with her fist until Don Pancho Obreon reared back in his saddle and filled the courtyard with a bombastic outburst of laughter.

"Look at the fire of the little Señorita Carmelita!" he cried as he managed to bring his laughter under control. "*Caramba,* she is like the fire of the moun-

tains where the volcanoes send up their smoke! But come, señorita." He pinned to the old man now beginning to twitch on the warm stones. "He is not dead. There is yet life in the old thief. A few cuts mean little to his tough old hide. Soon he will be as good as new—and quite able to steal again, eh, no, little beautiful one?"

His burst of laughter, was rudely cut short by a sudden clatter of racing hoofs pounding into the courtyard. A tall man on a sweat-lathered bay pulled up and broke loose with a string of rapid Spanish that brought a quick look of alarm to Obreon's face.

"The Rurales are close, Don Pancho!" The newcomer gasped. "There are many of them. They are coming by the way of the little cañons to the southwest where it is impossible to see them until they are almost at hand. There are no less than three score of them!"

Obreon did not give him a chance to finish. "Get these people where they belong. Quick, you louts! There is no time to lose. Their horses must be hidden and everything in order. At once! Do you not know danger when it comes crawling as close as this?"

THE fear of those ever-roving companies of Mexican police looked real enough. But McCrackin was certain that the bulk of the servants could have welcomed the coming had cold terror not been impressed on them as to what they would finally fall in case of general trouble. Peonage in its most brutal form was still found in the remote places where such powerful overlords as Don Pancho Obreon held his sway.

These lowly and harmless people here were slaves, and no slave would dare to lift his voice in complaint. He might make the mistake of lamenting to the wrong person, even to the captain of Rurales, who would pretend to listen gravely, then ride away with gold in his fine belt and leave the poor slave to take the full measure of his master's ire.

Adolph Himmel did not have to be given a single order. As the slave-driver who knew every mean angle of his job, he barked a few orders, and people scurried away to their work, to appear as the most contented souls on earth when the police arrived.

Obreon did not have to trouble himself with McCrackin and the rest of his prisoners. The smoky-dark man he had called Keener took charge here. At a wiggle of his finger, a dozen of his men dropped out of their saddles and came forward with six-shooters in their hands and evil leers on their faces.

Adolph Himmel had already sent peons scurrying forward to take charge of the horses and whisk them away to shadowy stables.

McCrackin and the girl helped the yet dazed and whimpering old Ramón Chacon up from the stones. His back would not be pretty for some dashing young captain to see. One never knew just what kind of man might be found at the head of a company of Rurales. Many of them were not to be bought off at any price, and the sight of old Ramón's bloody back might involve a lot of questions.

Don Miguel Castelar was being helped along by two of his men when the little group was herded into the huge hallway with gunmen swarming at either side of them.

It was a long walk. The *casta* was one mass of rooms and hallways after another, an ancient city in itself. Before McCrackin was much older he was to learn from Carmelita Castelar that the Spanish had come to this particular spot as early as 1643, fanatically certain that it was their sacred mission to enslave or put to inglorious death every Indian in the country. Slave labor for the taking, that had fed itself as well as the Conquistadores, had worked long and well here. There were scores of dungeons under the place, for the Spanish were the kind to burrow deeply and dankly for their prison holes, but the entrances to most of them were probably long-forgotten, and the dungeons themselves now hiding places for rats and snakes.

Where the prisoners finally halted appeared at first as a single underground room that was long and broad, dry and airy, and hidden somewhere under the vast jumble of old houses and towers. Forty men and women could howl and scream their heads off here without being heard. Rusty chains and torture racks still hung against the walls, seen dimly by the light that filtered in through a high

hole overhead. A great slab of stone roughly cut into a table sat in the center of the broad rock floor.

"If yuh know what's good for yuh," warned Keener just before he closed an iron-bound door behind them, "yo'll keep yore mouths shut. I reckon you'll get somethin' to eat a little later. There'll be a guard at this door. If yuh start anything he'll know what to do. An' don't get impatient. That gang of police might be here three or four days for all I know. They most generally like Don Pancho's grub an' his wine," he grinned. "Don Pancho knows how to get 'em lickin' his hand. He's a sharper, that fella."

McCrackin strolled on as the great door closed and powerful bolts harshly shot into place. Through an arch to his right ran a narrow, stone-walled hallway with a deeply shadowed little room at either side and another, slightly larger one ahead where stronger light showed. It proved to be no more than a roofless pit with smooth walls thirty feet high stretching up to an open square.

He had had no chance yet to talk to Don Miguel Castelar, the girl or any of the others who had made their wild dash across the river, but he had noticed the tow-head following him with his eyes. The tow-head was now behind him. As McCrackin turned at the sound of his booted and spurred feet on the stone floor, the tow-head thrust out his hand.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you, mister!" he smiled grimly. "I saw how you helped us back there at the river. My name's George Anderson, a cowboy from the Bitter Root River country up Montana way, before I came down into this part of the world. I think I heard you mention Montana to that damned Pancho Obreon."

"Yuh did, George." McCrackin gripped his hand. "Know it well up there, but," he glanced at the opening overhead, "I didn't exactly get run out as I tried to let that fella believe. My name's McCrackin. Just plain Bill, for short. What happened to yuh folks on the other side of the Border, to give yuh such a runnin' an' fightin' fit? That is, if yuh feel like talkin' about it."

"It's no secret, Bill." Anderson forwned bitterly. "Don Miguel has a little silver mine over there. Our pack-trains were being held up and men killed. Talk got around that Don Miguel was having his own pack-trains held up and men he wanted out of the way killed. It was as black a lie as anybody could tell on an honest man. It was carefully handled to get Don Miguel run off his property, and you can bet it was started and engineered all the way through by Pancho Obreon. Obreon is the worst thief on this Border. There isn't a thing he hasn't done or won't do. He has robbed more people, killed more—"

Anderson caught himself and stood there staring. Bullwhip Bill McCrackin was not paying the slightest attention in the world to him. He was staring upward, left hand stroking the shiny blacksnake whip on his shoulder. His old eyes were glinty and hard as they fastened their steady gaze on a round stub of rusty iron the size of his wrist twenty feet high in the smooth wall to his left.

"Do yuh know somethin', George?" His voice was a tense whisper as he reached over and put his hand on Anderson's arm and gave it a firm squeeze. "Well, cowboy, that fella Don Pancho Obreon ain't nigh as smart as he thinks he is. . . . Gimme the makin's of a smoke, will yuh? I'm plumb fresh out of both the chawin' an' the burnin' kind. Tobacco sometimes helps me figger things out."

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### El Capitan Makes a Call

DON PANCHO OBREON was already playing a stiff little game. He sat in the great room off the left side of the big hallway where Castelars had gathered many times for almost two hundred years before him. A big ledger bound in cowhide lay at his right hand. Stacks of silver and gold were in front of him.

The room was set for an emergency. Gunmen lurked in the shadows on the great balcony all around it. Bottles of liquor were in decanters to his left, surrounded by shining glasses on an enormous silver tray that was almost as old as the room.

Rurales always made him a little sick. Some of them were such smart fools. If he could handle them without a great deal of bother and send them merrily on their way, then they could be considered as an asset to be used again and again if he needed them.

Once a man could be wheedled into taking money from him that man was as good as his slave. But the infernal struts who were stupid enough to want to be honest were the hard ones. Yet they had been here when he had had prisoners under lock and key, and they had gone away without being any wiser. No prisoner was allowed to leave here if there was the slightest possibility of trouble afterwards coming from him. Murder was no new thing at the *casta*. Its very walls were erected on blood.

The noise of many horses in the courtyard had come to him only a few minutes before. A captain had been let inside, a smart, quick-as-a-trigger fellow with waxed mustaches and looking as stiffly important in his uniform as one of the many old suits of Spanish armor in their exalted niches around the immense room with the mantle of its giant fireplace higher than the head of a man on horseback.

Obreon had not looked up for a long minute as he pretended to chase figures up and down a page of the big ledger. When he lifted his head it was like a start, and all the flowery words he could call to tongue came pouring from him.

"*Madre de Dios, mi capitán!*" he cried. "A thousand pardons for detaining you. Come and refresh yourself." He waved to the tray and the bottle. "You must be tired and thirsty. The day has been warm and long—"

"I did not come to refresh myself, Don Pancho." The younger man's voice fell like a hammer blow. "Keep to your chair —and *'sta bueno*. I have heard of the shining money, the pretty bottles and the handsome glasses on the old, old tray that awaits an officer of the Rurales at this once-noble house. I am unimpressed. I come as a man and not as a monkey in breeches to dance to the tunes you choose to play."

"So, *mi capitán?*" Obreon turned white and slumped back into his chair as if an invisible hand had slammed him down. This bluntness on the part of the strut in front of him was entirely unexpected. "I do not understand, *mi amigo.*"

"I shall not delay you long." The officer came forward and seated himself arrogantly on the corner of the table. "I am Captain Francisco de José, lately ordered to command the Rurales in this district. As I have said, I am a man. I am no cockroach, and I do not hesitate to tell you, Don Pancho, that it will be my duty as well as my joy to hang you on a strip of rusty barbwire before I leave your territory."

"You speak very plainly, *mi amigo!*" Obreon's eyes were like burning jewels in a ruddy idol's face now. "I do not know that I have ever met you or done anything to court your evil will—"

"Don Pancho, you have never met me." José laughed silkily. "We are, perhaps, both alive because of it, but there must be a first time for all things. I know you well, as I make it a point to know all tht thieves, the liars and the cut-throats in any district I am ordered to take over. Keep your seat! I am much, much smaller than you, but I do not frighten easily. I know you have your gunmen all around the room, hiding above us along the balconies and up the chimney, for all I care. I have forty of the most excellent fighting men outside it has been my pleasure to command, and I am not so young as my face and manner might lead you to believe.

"I know how you squeezed out the good Don Miguel Castelar and his daughter from this fine old place." José was looking at the ceiling and swinging his foot now. "By the crooked play of politics and a few uncrupulous friends in Mexico City, you obtained the land here and all that was upon it. A smarter man would have been satisfied to let the matter lie. You could not do that. You have gone on to engage yourself into everything that is foul. Don Pancho," he lowered his head and leaned across the table, dark eyes intense with half-smiling danger, "you had to become a common thief, running cattle and horses across the Border during the dark of the moon, and having cattle and horses run back to you from the rangelands of honest *gringo* and *mejicano* ranchers on the other side.

He laughed that silky little laugh again that bored through one like a dull awl. "Oh, sit still. Don Pancho I have come to tell you all so there will be no misunderstanding when I return to hang you. Today, working through two of your henchmen on the other side who happen to wear the badges of authority, you have again made Don Miguel Castelar and his daughter flee their honest holdings. Don Pancho," his voice dropped to a whisper, those burning eyes like adder eyes now, "if they could but be placed in your hands you would force them to turn over everything they own to you, and then, Don Pancho, you would secretly kill them. I do not intend to see that happen."

"But—but I haven't seen them!" gasped Obreon. "You can't accuse me of something I have not done!"

*"Mi amigo,* I but need a few more grains of evidence." José laughed in a whisper. "They were seen through a powerful telescope, trying to fight their way off the tall slopes and down to the river. Some of my men are now searching for them. Others under my command will soon be joining the search. You, Don Pancho, were having those hold-ups made across the Border. You, Don Pancho, are the carrion of the Border, and I will yet see the buzzards pluck your eyes out before I am done.

*"Buenas tardes, hombre!"* He slid off the corner of the table and bowed mockingly. "As I turn my face to walk away, I dare you to shoot me in the back or pass the signal for your hiding gunmen to lift one finger to detain me. And that, Don Pancho, is what I think of you, your inviting piles of silver and gold—and your pretty bottles and glasses. Surely you must know by this time, you evil ape, that I am unimpressed. But I shall return. One of my men carries a length of barbwire neatly coiled and wrapped in a piece of cotton on his saddle for your neck."

Obreon sat there staring, never whipped so completely in his life. He saw José go out the door, watched him turn down the hall. Horses were snorting outside a few moments later. He heard them turn away and go out of the courtyard, then he suddenly slumped in his chair when he saw that long Walt Keener had come out of hiding and had appeared beside him like a dark and hungry bird of prey.

*"Dios!"* he hissed. "Send men immediately to watch them. The sun is already down. They must soon pitch camp. The camp must be watched. Tonight when it is very dark we must get rid of the ones under the lock and key. All traces of them must be far, far away from here before dawn. That man is dangerous."

"Or," nodded Keener, "he's mighty damn' smart, if yuh ask me. Maybe he's playin' for big money."

"Señor Keener," Obreon looked tired enough to wilt when he glanced up, "the man is both smart and a fool. He will yet die a pauper. All the money in Mexico could not buy that utterly useless thing he calls his honor. It is thoroughly annoying and unforgivingly stupid of him, no?"

★

McCRACKIN kept his thoughts to himself for a time, but that stub of rusty iron in the wall never left his mind. For an expert with a long, strong whip it would be no trouble to get up there. But what was beyond it was the thing that counted the most.

The wall of stone along the top looked as smooth as the rim of a gravy bowl. With just a little hard luck a man could slip up and fall back to break his confounded neck for his pains. But anything would be worth trying when the oppor-

tunity presented itself. In the meanwhile, the proper thing to do was to keep a tight lip where all the others were concerned.

George Anderson was not to be doubted from the start, but Anderson had warned him to expect suspicion from Race King, the low-browed black-head who had helped him fight the delaying action down the slopes to the river with Don Miguel and his daughter. King was a quick-tempered, highly nervous cuss, and McCrackin wanted no part of him.

"Race just doesn't trust anybody—not even himself," Anderson had told him. "He's too much like a bull who charges first and stops to think about what he has done afterwards. The others are not much better when it comes to expecting the worst from everybody they meet, but they're otherwise all right. They're as loyal to Don Miguel as they come."

"This Race, maybe," McCrackin had ventured, cocking one eye at him, "is a mite jealous of yuh an' the purty gal? No need to answer that one, cowboy." He had given him a rough pat on the shoulder. "Old bats sometimes see just a little more'n what's good for 'em. We'll pop off at the mouth in spite of the devil, if an' when we can find somebody to listen to us."

With the sun down the shadows were crawling when they turned back into the main room, and McCrackin could see at once that Castelar and his daughter were watching him questioningly. Race King kept his mouth shut, but it was certain that he had been talking to the old man and the girl while McCrackin and Anderson were out of the room.

Keener had said something about food being sent to them, but it looked as if the half-way promise had been forgotten. As the shadows deepened in the room they lighted a big candle stub hanging on a rusty wire bracket. The sickly glimmer of light filled the huge room with ghoulish shadows shimmering across the floor and along the ancient walls.

With what he had seen and what Anderson had told him, it was not hard for McCrackin to figure out what was in store for the Castelars and anybody who took sides with them.

They had been forced to leave this massive old place only four years before. An eastern tip of the land had extended on across the river for a dozen miles inside the American Border and close to a little silver mining town called Ten Spot, and by coming back here—with no real choice of their own—they had leaped right back into boiling water up to their ears.

"Ten Spot's a hell-hole if you ever looked at one," Anderson had said. "It's the eastern gateway for smuggling up and down the Border. Marshal Preen Brody, a gang of tinhorn gamblers and gunmen run Ten Spot, lock and stock. You heard what Don Miguel told Obreon. They came to the mine today only to kill him and make sure he would forever be out of their way. But it isn't so much the mine they want.

"That country's an ideal runway for the wet herds pushed across the river at night from one side to the other. About two months ago Brody had enough crust to make Don Miguel a proposition to see that he was let alone, if he would just keep his eyes closed and his mouth shut—and, of course, do a little strong lying now and then. When he refused—well, a bullet was notched for him."

It was an old tale to McCrackin. Wet cattle were constantly being shuttled back and fourth across the river in this country. Men grew rich on it, and when wholesale outfits like this started operating, honest ranchers everywhere within miles of it began losing their shirts. With cowmen made bankrupt, it was easy to take their lands for a song and drive them completely out of the country.

When darkness had settled and there was still no sign of food, McCrackin sauntered back to have a look at the stub of iron. Anderson followed him, and they stood there whispering for several minutes.

With Anderson watching the rim of the pit, McCrackin took his place close against the wall. The deadly old bullwhip was now into action. He sent it uncoiling and slithering up the wall with the slightly gliding sound of a moving snake. At the second throw a couple of feet of the end of it slapped three or four tight coils around the iron. He gave it a quick flip, and a blackwall hitch had been made high up there above his head.

Anderson stood pop-eyed and holding his breath when McCrackin started up the

shiny old whip like a monkey on a string. The iron stub was about twenty inches long.

When McCrackin reached it he pulled himself up carefully, chest pumping like bellows and his breath gasping. He was not so young any more, and he had to work desperately to get himself high enough to hook the stub under his armpit and grasp the belt and waistband of his old trousers and bullhide chaps to hold on and keep his arm bent around it while he caught his wind.

The rest of it was the worst. He sent the whip up a dozen times, like a feeling snake, before it caught itself solidly on something beyond the rim of the wall. He gave it a couple of pulls to test it, and again he had to rest before he started up the rest of the way.

Just as he reached the top he heard angry voices rising behind him. Anderson was signaling desperately for him to hurry, as Keener's loudly demanding voice came to him through the hallway from the big room.

"Where's that tow-head an' the old buzzard with the whip?"

"That's what I'm wondering." Anderson answered him and wheeled back just as McCrackin cleared the top. "That is, I'm wondering what became of the other fellow. He's gone."

"Gone! When? Where—and *how?*"

"That's just what I don't know!" cried Anderson. "I've looked all over for him —and he's just *gone*!"

Men came forward in a rush, six-shooters cocked and ready, everybody stumbling and cursing. Anderson was hurled to one side and knocked off his feet in the wild stampede. McCrackin got one glimpse of Keener over the rim as he lay there trying to recover his breath. Then, leaving them to figure out the mystery for themselves, he turned to see what had caught the end of his whip and held it so firmly while he pulled himself up from the iron stub.

It was a surprise to find himself walled in again. He was virtually on a square shelf of old flagstones no more than eight feet wide. The knot where the rawhide lash was made fast to the end of the whip had lodged in a narrow crack between two broad slabs of stone, and for a time it looked as if he would have to cut off the end before he could work it upward and jerk it free.

The instant the whip was free he was looking around for another place to escape. Below him, merry hell was growing worse at every second. Keener must have returned with a regular swarm of gunmen at his heels. At any moment the whole place was going to be alarmed and men would search for the escaped prisoner from every direction.

An iron-bound door stood ahead. Everything about this infernal old *casta* seemed to be iron-bound, and when McCrackin reached the door he found that it was fastened from the inside. He gave it a jab with his shoulder, and stood back with a grunt. Only a bull-elephant could budge that thing, but all hope was not gone when he glanced along the high walls stretching skyward all around him.

An old wooden-railed balcony loomed out of the shadows above the southeast corner of the pit. With the noise still raging below he slid up quietly under the overhang and put the whip to work again. At the second cast he had a firm grip on the railing and was starting up, the monkey on the string again, bound for parts yet unknown.

It was about sixteen feet to the balcony, an easier climb now, but his luck began to desert him here. When he was half way up, swinging like a pendulum on the whip, he heard the groaning, cracking sound overhead.

He swore in a whisper and gritted his teeth, knowing that the worst was coming. Old wood could last only so long when exposed to the winds, the sun and the rains. The balcony was coming apart, the wood snapping, a timber loosening here and there, the whole thing appearing slowly to move out into space with a suffocating cloud of dust and a pelting shower of splinters coming down on his head and shoulders.

He slid back just in time. It took a couple of rolling half-hitch flips to free the whip, then he was cowering down against the wall to cover his face and head the best he could with his hands and arms. Groaning and shattering into a loud noise, most of the balcony was coming on down.

In one huge tattered chunk it struck

the rim of the pit with a thundering racket, bounced in a separating upfling, and poured on down, to bring a wild outburst of terror from the gang of men who had been arguing below.

It had to be fast work from now on, or everything would soon be lost. McCrackin came up, choking in the dust, splinters and little chunks of wood still raining down on him from some of the wreckage above. Taking full advantage of the dust around him, he sent the whip up again and again until he felt it make another solid catch.

Now it was do or die. Even with death staring him in the face many times in tht past, he had never been a quitter. He went up, the wreckage above him holding in a quivering mass. In a final furious scramble he hauled himself up on the broken splinters of a stub of timber.

He was against a door now. On his dangerous perch he freed the whip, coiled it around his left forearm, and then felt upward along the warped cracks of the door. This time his hand came in contact with a latch. He gave it a tug, heard a rusty strip of iron slip, and the door started groaning open, just as a shot roared at him from the far side of the floor of the pit.

★

HE WHISKED himself inside as the old floor started groaning and creaking underfoot. It was as dark as a thundercloud in here. Three or four men below were shooting at the doorway and everybody yelling his head off at the same time, as if that would help stop him or bring him back. He dropped to his hands and knees, the thought striking him that the entire place was completely aroused by this time, and scores of men hunting him, each trying to outdo the other in the hurry to capture or kill him.

In the blackness he kicked the door closed and lay there trying to listen. Only the musty smell of long-rotted and falling-apart wood came to him. Whatever this part of the old *casta* had been it had probably not felt a footfall inside its ancient walls for many scores of years.

There would be holes in here, planking to give away under his weight, timbers to crumble and let him go crashing down sometimes for as little as the vibration of a man's voice or merely the sounds of his moving feet.

He had had dreams of things like this, youthful nightmares that had often brought him tumbling out of bed and filling the whole house with his yells. But now it was the real thing. He struck a match, eyes widening in the wavery light. It was worse than he had thought it could be.

It was a death-trap that even the rats must have shunned for scores of years. He was in a big hallway with the floor splintered and fallen away ahead of him, leaving only a black pit there from which an evil stench arose.

His only hope now was a half-closed door a yard ahead to his right. It was small hope at best. The door was warped and cracked, hanging drunkenly on the remains of one big wooden hinge. He reached it, gave it a push, and it reeled back and down, flying into dozens of pieces and with a noise loud enough to awaken the dead. It was then that he saw night light faintly coming down on him from a narrow stairway to his left.

The stairs led to the roof, but they were as shackley and dangerous as the rest of it. More than half of the puncheon-planked floor below was gone, old timbers hanging, buckled boards bent and sloped outward in a ragged tear over black space of unknown depth at the dank bottom of which snakes and rats would hide. But it was long past the time for him to try to turn back.

Wiggle, wiggle, crack and wiggle! He held his breath as rotted pieces of wood gave way underfoot. Old planks swayed, cracked and broke. A large piece of timber dropped off like crunching-chalk and hurtled down through the fearsome hole in the floor. It seemed like a minute before he heard a far-away splash coming up as it struck long-stagnant water.

The stairs were actually falling behind him when he reached the roof. He got away from the spot as quickly as he could. Now it was like being on a baseball diamond thrust high in the air. He started across it, the perspiration pouring from his face. In a few yards he wheeled in sudden fear to go cowering back closer to the edge of the roof when he felt the

whole thing sway under his feet and heard timbers cracking somewhere and showers of wood falling.

Death itself was sometimes not half as bad as this. A man could get shot and fall over and know he was going to land on the ground. Up here he did not know where in the hell he was going to stop if the roof opened up and let him drop.

He was going eastward along the edge to his right now and keeping down, not yet knowing just where he was trying to go or how he was to get there. And then he was suddenly halting with the question being decided for him in a manner that took his breath away.

Something was coming up a wiggling stairway on the outer side of the wall ahead to join him. At first it did not look like a man at all. Low stars showing in the east behind the thing seemed to magnify it. It was a wide-breasted, low-headed something with two powerful clubs bent downward at either side of it with brute strength like the swinging arms of a powerful gorilla walking on its hindfeet.

It came out from behind the break in the rim of the wall where the top of the steps reached the roof, and stood there like a barrel balanced on two legs, the head turning, two wicked little eyes peering around, searching. Then it moved its right hand and something snake-like went uncoiling out across the roof and came to the end of its roll with a furious pop. A throaty chuckle came to McCrackin's ear.

He realized then that he was just about to come face to face with the devil and have it out once and for all here on the dangerous roof.

That ugly thing against the stars was Adolph Himmel, the *casta* whipping-boss.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Duel of the Blacksnake Men

THERE was no need for words now. Adolph Himmel was of the cold and merciless killer type as long as he held all the advantage. The beast was written in his forehead, in the undershot jaw, in the stout hands swinging apishly at his sides.

He had been with Keener when Keener and ten men had gone to the huge underground room to bring Don Miguel and his daughter before Don Pancho. In the excitement he had known that one prisoner had escaped and how he had escaped. He did not know which of the prisoners it was, but that did not trouble him. The roof of the old building was the logical place to head him off—if he got that far. He would be a man without a weapon, and Adolph Himmel liked to meet men that way.

*"Ja!"* he sneered, spotting his man now as he brought the whip back like a dozen rolling black hoops flying to his hand and coiling around his forearm. "You vould run avay, hey? You vould try to hide from Adolph, hey? Now you must face Adolph. *Ja*! Und I show you vat, *ja!"*

He had a six-shooter at his right hip and a knife at the other, but the whip was the thing to make men scream and beg. He had fastened a six-inch strip of steel chain on the lash on his way to the underground room. He took a step forward. Quicker than a mink, he shot the whip out, expecting the man in front of him to leap backward as the poor servants always leaped when he struck for them. And it was there that he was fooled.

Adolph Himmel's would-be victim plunged forward this time, a black, snake-like thing coming to life in his hand, and Himmel knew only at that moment that it was the old man he had seen on the white horse with a whip coiled around his shoulder.

This devil was full of fight and a master when it came to handling a whip. Himmel tried to duck, spoiling his own stroke. Something stung him across the cheek, splitting through the flesh like a hot blade and letting the taste of blood into his mouth.

He reeled on back, cleared his whip, and slashed forward another stroke, one that now caught the older man a thumping blow on the chest. At that instant something exploded like a .45 going off against Himmel's jaw, and he was down on his hands and knees, a reeling and stumbling thing trying desperately to get back to his feet.

Never had Adolph Himmel seen a whip go and come so quickly. He kept retreating, left hand snatching for his knife, right hand too busy with the whip to reach

for the six-shooter at the other hip. As the hand with the knife came up, the older man's whip struck again. It hit the hand right on the back, jerking it to one side, and the knife slipped and spun over the rim of the roof.

"Ja!" he snarled. "Ja! Und now I shoot you!"

He tried to swap hands with the whip, but the blow had half-paralyzed the left hand. He fumbled his toss. The whip dropped, his right hand now pawing at his side and closing on the butt of his Colt. That terrible whip was back as the weapon was clearing the holster. It caught the six-shooter, gave it a furious jerk that snatched it out of the hand and sent it spinning away across the roof.

"An' now," ordered the older man, quietly, "yuh pick up that damned whip, Adolph. I've been doin' tricks with one of these things for some twenty-odd years an' more. I ain't yet met the bully who can beat me when it comes to throwin' a bullsnake. Pick up that whip. Yuh an' me are goin' to have it out. I figured we would when I saw the way yuh had cut up the old fella called Ramón Chacon. I only beat up yore kind like that."

"I vill take out your eyes, *ja*!" Himmel ducked and seized the whip again, but even as he came up with it the realization was upon him that he had, at last, met a better man. "I vill blind you und den kill you like a dog!"

"Speakin' of blindin', now." The low chuckle made Adolph Himmel's blood chill. "I ain't no slouch at that. Blindin' let it be, but just remember yuh called the tune for it. Look at me!"

The slashing whip was back. Himmel felt it and heard it crash, this time a stick of dynamite going off against his nose. He stumbled back, blinded. The whip tore into him again. He dropped his whip and turned to flee, and another biting stroke caught him flat across the back of his neck, knocking him to his knees. With a croak of rage he came up, wheeled, and started back, going to end it in a wild charge.

Adolph Himmel simply did not know old Bullwhip Bill McCrackin. He could not even see him very well. McCrackin seemed to have become only a shadowy dancer, a nightmare reeling and rocking with a streak of black lightning darting and playing forward from his right hand, the strokes coming with the rapidity of a striking snake.

It was murder now. Another crash of the wicked lash was landing straight to its mark, rocking Himmel back on his heels. Before he could right himself he was down, rump smashing on the roof, everything blood and blackness around him. In a moment more he was up, thoroughly blinded and trying to flee, not caring or knowing where he was going as long as he got away from that awful whip in the hand of the devil.

The sagging of the roof and the noise of something breaking and spilling below halted him with a terrific squall of terror. Wiping his hands across his eyes and clearing them enough to stare at his feet as if looking through a thick fog, he saw that the roof under him was sagging like a blanket. Then there was nothing under his feet. A hole was opening, breaking, cracking and grinding, the blackness coming up with a rush.

*"Mein Gott!"* he cried *"Kamerad, help!"*

It was the end of Adolph Himmel, the whipping boss. He went down in a roar, in crashes that followed crashes, down through the rotted fall of timber, stones and crumbling planks—down to one floor, and through it, down to a second with everything having turned to chalk, and then on and on into the eternal blackness of one of the deepest old holes of the *casta* where only the bones of the ancient dead were waiting their Judgment Day. . . .

★

A MOB of men were coming up those shackley outside steps with an insane rush. McCrackin was looking for Himmel's six-shooter in the brightening starlight. He got a glimpse of it, but was too late to save it. The hole in the roof was still rapidly widening, the thunder of falling debris growing, the entire roof trembling under the shattering noise.

Adolph Himmel's long whip was the only thing he could save. He snatched it up, cowering back against the rim and moving toward the head of the stairs. He never got to see how many people were trying to come up to the roof, but it was

certain that there were too many of them for the old wood. He glimpsed the top of one head coming up, and then squalls of terror were raging, the old steps cracking, bending outward, timbers snapping, planks breaking. It was impossible to tell which was the loudest, the noise of the crashing wood or the wails of terror that came up when the stairs fell.

McCrackin, it appeared was slated for death in a very few moments just as Adolph Himmel had met it. For that fearsome hole out there was no longer near the center of the roof. It was still widening, the dust boiling out of it and making a growing pall against the starlight, as if a volcano was spouting to life almost underfoot and caving-in everything around it.

McCrackin balanced himself on the rim, like a man on a tight rope, high in the air and started to run. He was none too quick about it. The roof where he had been standing was going now, the wall teetering from the tremendous vibration of the sudden fall-in. At any moment these entire walls might be collapsing.

Adolph Himmel's long whip actually saved his life when he came to the corner of the roof. A tall tree was there with a big limb extending outward to the right about fifteen feet away. He sent Adolph's whip snaking out for it. Its end snapped around the limb, held, and with no time to lose he swung out, a shadow flying in space making to a lower roof.

They could have had him without a struggle had they been there on the second roof when he landed. He came down in a wad, rolled and bounced, all the breath knocked out of him. For almost five minutes he was still, a dazed thing struggling blindly to get his bearings again, an old bear of a thing with all the fight out of him for another five minutes.

When he arose he was limping, right leg feeling as if he had jarred the kneecap loose. But he was not going to hang around trying to take stock for himself.

Men were still hunting him, a shadow appearing here and there on a roof, and he started on, desperate at times as he worked himself toward the general direction of the place where he had been forced


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at the point of a Colt to leave old Gabriel's Trumpet. It was a long trip, and he fell again just as the shadows and starlight were telling him he was getting to the place.

The sounds of a bitter argument and a girl screaming came up to him when he reached his last roof, and he recognized Don Pancho's voice in the noise. It was coming up to him as if rising from a deep barrel, and he saw that he was near one of three modernized skylights. Below the nearest one a dull glow of light was showing.

"I'm the master here!" Obreon was raging. "Either you'll do what I say right now or I'll take the feet off of him with those candles, and send him back across the river tonight! You know what will happen to him when they get him on the other side! Preen Brody will hang you both as soon as he gets his hands on you!"

McCrackin did not need to hear any more. He turned and started looking for a way to get down to where the light was glowing. In a short time he had reached the skylight, and then it was only a matter of taking a turn of his whip around an iron stub, slowly and carefully lowering himself to the recently carpeted floor to the end of a large, square balcony looking down on the huge room below with its coats of Spanish armor and the tall mantle above the fireplace.

It was not a pretty sight ahead of him down there, directly under the middle skylight. Pancho Obreon sat at the end of the huge table, a grand Napoleon with his broad back to a stairway leading up to the balcony above the north side of the room. Don Miguel, flanked by big gunmen at either side, was stretched flat on his back and roped in place on the table with a big candle burning within a few inches of each bare foot. The girl and the rest of the prisoners, even to the weeping old Ramón Chacon, were lined up at the other side of the room with a swarm of gunmen behind them.

"The candles do not yet burn the old feet, Señorita Carmelita." Obreon was speaking to the girl. "An inch at a time they will be moved closer, and I warn you I am no man to waste time. When what I want is done I will give you ten thousand dollars in gold and send you on your way."

"You are a liar, Don Pancho!" cried Don Miguel. "After all this you dare not allow us to leave here alive. . . ."

McCrackin did not hear the rest of it. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen the shadowy figure of a guarding gunman strolling toward him with his face turned to the scene below. McCrackin stepped back between two tall old chests just in time.

In another moment the gunman might have seen him, but the darker shadows near the wall hid their secret, and the man came on, a most obliging fool with a six-shooter at either hip, and stopped right in front of McCrackin. One quick blow from the butt of the blacksnake whip dropped him like a rag quietly coming down in a wad on the carpet.

With a six-shooter in each hand, McCrackin turned away from the downed man. Within a few seconds he was at the head of the stairway. slipping down it like something greased. When he reached the foot he darted forward to the back of Don Pancho's chair, and let hell break loose from the six-shooter in his right hand while he jammed the muzzle of the other against Don Pancho's neck.

*"Set!"* he roared, blazing a man off his feet at either side of the table and knocking over another as he turned to flee toward the big fireplace. "Set still! If anybody takes a shot at me I'll blow yore head off, Don Pancho! Tell yore men! Tell 'em, damn yuh!"

"ONE moment, señor, please." The voice was so hellishly cool it was startling. It answered him from above the great fireplace on a bend of the balcony. "One minute sooner and you might have spoiled it all. If any one cares to fight let him look around him —and die if he makes a move!"

Rurales seemed to pop from everywhere. They were soon lining the balcony and coming in from the great hall and even the windows, their guns cocked and ready. The dapper captain came down, a smiling man twisting his waxed mustache. In his hand was a circular shape wrapped in travel-stained cloth that he tossed on the table as McCrackin stood there staring with the muzzle of the big Colt still jammed against Obreon's neck.

"That, Don Pancho," smiled the captain, "is the wire with which to hang you. After you are gone the Castelars will come back to all that belongs to them. With the aid of the honest American authorities I will soon clear up the little matter across the river. Were you really such a fool to think I would not return, Don Pancho?"

"You—you went into camp four miles away!" croaked Obreon.

"Don Pancho, my camp is still four miles away." The captain leaned on the table, looking at him. "But did you once think the poor ones you kept on here after you ran the Castelars away could ever be loyal to you? I slipped back with my men in the darkness, leaving the tents up and the fires burning. We were let in at the gates while your stupid guards watched the campfires in the distance. We were led through secret passageways you would never know about. I had heard and seen far more than enough."

He glanced at McCrackin, "Señor, will you take his revolvers?"

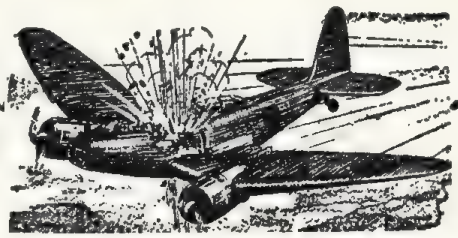
"Don Pancho," he leaned even closer, eyes sparkling, "I believe I will now taste the fine spirits in your fine bottles. I am a gentleman, and no gentleman would refrain from drinking a toast to his host before he takes the great pleasure in seeing your own servants hang you on that bit of wire I brought along. Ramón Chacon, bring the fine tray! To you shall go the honor of bending the wire around his very stupid neck."

McCrackin had stepped back. Don Pancho was like something paralyzed in his chair with great balls of perspiration slowly pouring down his face.

McCrackin looked on across the room. Beyond Don Pancho, gunmen behind their prisoners were standing with their hands lifted. Anderson, the tow-head, held the sobbing girl in his arms. It was all right, McCrackin guessed, but he was going to have to bum another smoke from George Anderson to clear his head.

Why, hellfire a'mighty, this young captain fella had stopped the show just when it was going good!

THE END

## THE LAST DOGFIGHT

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10¢ BATTLE BIRDS

# ★ The Buckskin Army

## By LES SAVAGE, Jr.

Cole leaned out of the saddle, swinging his rifle viciously.

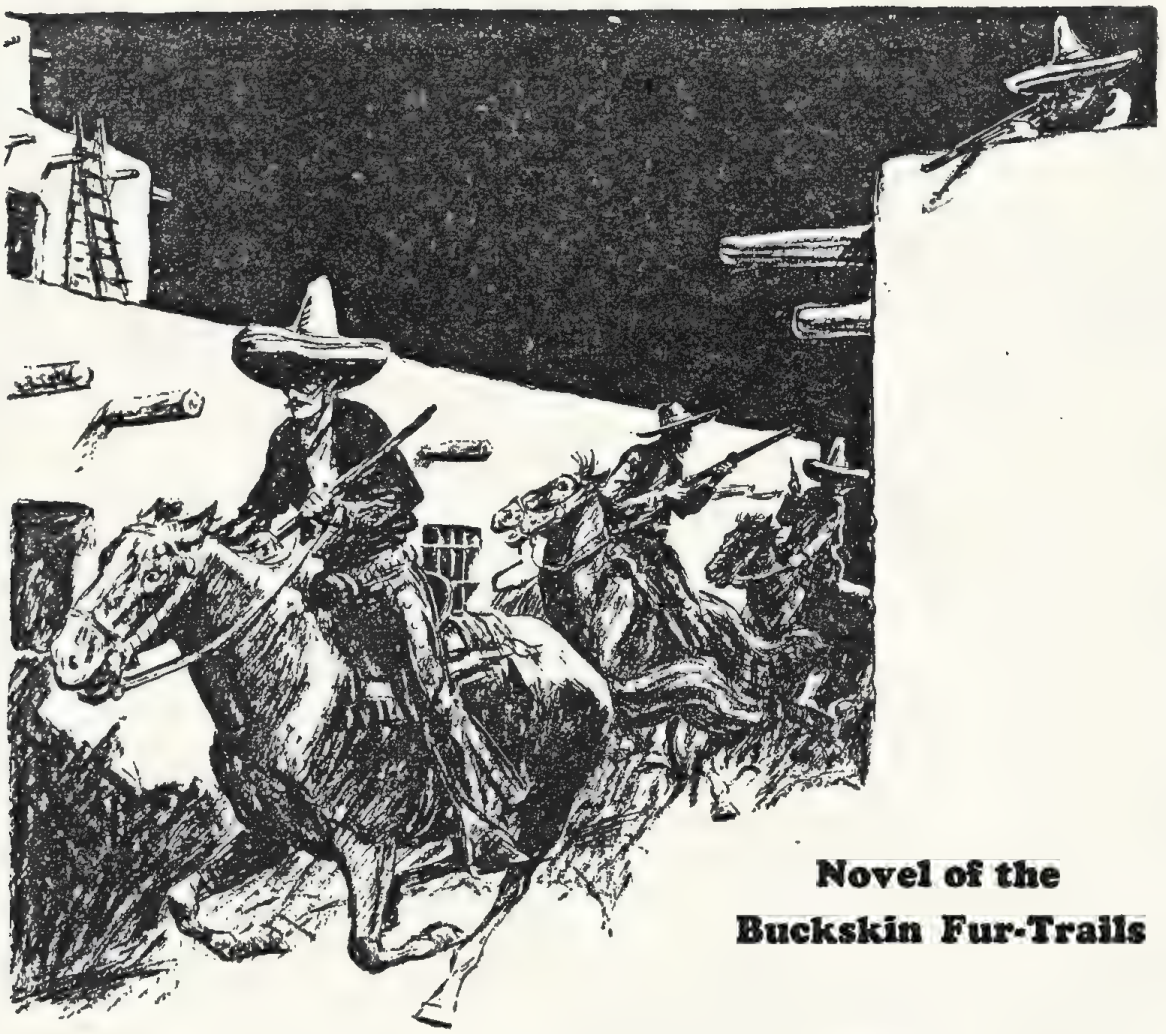
**When bullet-scarred Painter Cole rode into old Taos with the garroted corpse of Esperanza Panuela across his saddle, the dead trader's pardner warned him: "Right now, I wouldn't give a plugged peso for your life!" Yet that very night, the buckskin trapper raced an army of treacherous half-breeds, Yankee murderers and gold-hungry mozos to a strange hidden fortune—that would bring quick death to the man who found it first!**

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Death on the Trail

PAINTER COLE led his rawboned mare into Taos from the old Pecuris Trail, the bloody corpse of Esperanza Panuela tied face down across the saddle. Cole had sensed something wrong when he had reached the first out-

# Heads South! ★ ★ ★



**Novel of the Buckskin Fur-Trails**

lying hovels of the little New Mexican pueblo. Panuela had been a well-known fur-trader here for fifteen years, and sight of Cole bringing his dead body into town should have drawn a crowd instantly. Yet, the only sign of life was the flash of a terrified face at a doorway, or frightened eyes gleaming from a shadowed window.

Where the trail entered the sun-splashed plaza, Cole halted. Behind him stood his long train of Flathead pack horses, hipshot and jaded beneath their heavy packsaddles, their occasional snorts the only sound in the foreboding hush.

The sun of late summer shone hotly on Cole's tall, broad-shouldered figure, standing there among the ancient, terraced houses. He wore the grease-daubed hunting jacket and elkhide leggins of the free trapper. At some time in his past, he had mixed with a mountain lion—known to the trappers as a painter—and his face had been left terribly scarred. One of his ears was ripped to shreds. Four parallel claw marks started high on his bony forehead, cutting down across the big questing beak of a nose to the corner of his broad mouth, tugging it up into a perpetual, twisted smile. Men had forgotten his Christian name. He was known from Yellowstone to St. Looey as Painter Cole, the ugliest man in all the Rockies.

As the trapper turned to face Don Fernando Avenue where it entered the west side of the plaza, he realized what was the matter with Taos. Cimarron Saunders was in town.

The red-haired man was coming out of Don Fernando and across the plaza toward Cole, his cut-throat crew swaggering behind him. This was 1843, and New

Mexico was still a northern province of Mexico. There wasn't much law outside of Santa Fe, the capital of the province. And when a man like Cimarron Saunders came to town, the people locked what doors they had, and stayed inside their houses. Saunders tone was mocking, as he stopped in front of the trapper.

"Hello, Cole. Where did you run acrost Panuela in that fix?"

A smoldering enmity had long existed between these two men; for, among other activities, Saunders was a poacher. And a free trapper's hate for the men who poached his furs went so deep as to be almost inbred. Cole deliberately let a long moment go by before he answered the red-headed Saunders.

As the uncomfortable silence lengthened, anger flickered through the poacher's eyes. He was a big man, as tall as Cole, with a torso that bulged thickly beneath his blazing red wool shirt. He could handle a gun as well as most, and he packed one of Sam Colt's new Dragoons. But primarily he was a knife-man. Stuck through the broad black belt that held up his buckskins was a huge, curved *saca tripas*—gets the guts—the wicked plebian knife of the Mexican peon. His hairy hand had begun to caress its leather-wrapped hilt when Cole finally spoke.

"I come across Panuela yesterday evening, about twenty miles south of here. Some hombres had him spread-eagled on the ground and was giving him a good going over," said Cole, indicating the obvious marks of torture on the fur-trader's head and face. "They skeedadled when I took after 'em. It was almost dark and I didn't see who they was. But I shot one hombre's gun out'n his hand."

The trapper's glance left Saunders and swept among his men, looking for a bandaged hand, or an empty holster.

His eyes took in Pablo Rodriguez, tremendously fat bandito whose prodigious physique threatened to burst the seams of the blue, Mexican cavalry coat he wore. Beneath the floppy brim of his sombrero, his little eyes glittered malignantly at Cole. Neither of his pudgy hands was marked, and his .44 was in its usual place, struck through the broad red sash that banded his tremendous girth.

Saunders seemed to hold an anger in check, and speculation narrowed his eyes. "Was Panuela alive when you reached him?"

Cole kept on looking at the men. Tanay, the Mescalero Apache, was admittedly a murderer. He cut the ears off the hombres he killed, and sewed them into his belt. And dangling from each of his own ear lobes was eight or ten inches of gold watch chain, filched from the body of a hapless victim on the trail.

Cimarron Saunders had a hair-trigger temper, and he found it difficult to keep his voice from shaking with his growing anger. "I asked you, Cole, if Panuela was alive when you reached him."

"Yeah," said Cole. "Yeah. Panuela lived a minute after I got to him. . . ."

He knew suddenly that he had talked too much. The speculation slid from Saunders' eyes. He shook his red head from side to side, and his placid mouth spread in a smile. His crew began to spread out around Cole. Enrique Valzabar moved to one side on high-heeled boots; he was the scion of a clan that boasted nothing but bandidos and killers in its ranks since Onate founded Santa Fe in 1608. Claude Tate—a riverman from the wild Mizzou, his tattered wool pants supported by Yankee galluses—shifted to the other side.

★

PAINTER COLE knew how a beaver in a jumptrap felt. His eyes flashed to the creamy mud walls of Esperanza Panuela's hacienda on the east side of the plaza, not ten fet behind Saunders. To the right of the dark oak door that led into the house proper, was a *zaquan*—a tunnel-like passageway leading through the wall and into the inner patio. And in that shadowy *zaquan,* behind an iron gate, stood the half-breed, Tomosito, Panuela's partner. He was a clever man, Tomosito, an opportunist who would not put himself in Cimarron Saunders' way for a mere free trapper.

And Cole's own Paterson five-shot, sagging heavy against his hip, might as well have been left home. Whatever skill he had with a shooting-iron wouldn't save his life against the dozen guns of these men who now surrounded him completely.

Still caressing the leather-hafted *saca*

*tripas,* Saunders spoke again, harshly, demandingly. "Now, Cole, I want you to answer me another question—quick. What did Panuela tell you afore he died?"

Cole put one of his huge, bony hands up to his ugly chin, rubbing the black bristles almost thoughtfully. There were many variations to the tale of his battle with the painter. But there were even more legends of the incredible strength in his great trap-scarred hands.

He knew he had already irritated Saunders to the point where the man's temper was near exploding. He knew, too, Saunder's penchant for using his knife when that temper did explode. The resolution that now entered Cole's mind was a long chance, but it was the only way he could see out of this thing he had so unwittingly stepped into. When he finally spoke, it was in a stridently contemptuous tone, deliberately calculated to infuriate Cimarron Saunders.

"I've answered enough of your damn' questions, poacher. I don't know why I wasted talk with you in the first place. Now, git out of my way!"

Amazement was in the sag of Saunder's mouth. Then a dull red flush crept up his bull-neck and into his heavy-jawed face. With a throaty curse, he lunged forward, yanking out his *saca tripas.*

Cole met Saunders' lunge almost before the man had started, big hand closing around Saunders' wrist. With a pull and a wrench, he twisted that wrist until the knife was reversed, sharp point digging into the poacher's belly. Enrique Valzabar had his gun out by then, and Rodriquez had drawn, his cocked hammer making a sharp, metallic sound.

"Tell your coyotes not to shoot," panted Cole. "Or I'll rip your guts out!"

Still trying to jerk backwards out of Cole's grip, Saunders gasped. "Don't shoot. He'll rip me, sure's his word."

And suddenly he quit struggling, standing very still, breathing harshly. He was a big, heavy man with solid muscle packed into his thickest torso. Perhaps he could have wrenched loose from that one vise-like hand, using all his strength and weight. But the point of the *saca tripas* was driven so hard against his belly that his red wool shirt had spilt beneath it. One thrust of Cole's incredible hand, and Saunders would spit himself on his own blade.

Cole reached backward for his mare's reins. Still holding Saunders' wrist so the knife was against the man's stomach, the trapper began moving forward, shoving at Saunders with short vicious jabs, moving him back against the wall of Panuela's hacienda.

"Open that door, Tomosito," called Cole. "Git this mare inside. And my pack train too. I got a year's harvest of beaver plews on them hosses, and I don't wanta leave 'em out here with these poachers."

Tomosito had retreated out of sight, and the gate was opened by an impassive *mozo*—one of Panuela's Indian man-servants. Over the sound of the pack horse's plodding hoofs, as they followed the mare through the *zaquan,* Cole could hear the shuffle of feet in the plaza behind him. Jamming the knife in a little harder, he growled:

"Tell your hombres to stop right where they are, Saunders!"

"Do like he says," cried Saunders. "And put them guns away. I don't want my belly cut out because somebody's finger slipped!"

Cole's perpetual smile grew a little, mirthlessly. Then all the horses were through the creamy 'dobe wall with its net-work of weather-cracks. Cole whirled Saunders around until the redhead was in between him and the others. He let go of the man's wrist, shoving him violently, stepping back into the cool shade of the *zaquan.* The *mozo* slammed the iron gate shut on Cimarron Saunders' choked curses.

Esperanza Panuela's hacienda was a typical New Mexican house—a sprawling, one-story building, built around the inner patio they called a *placita.* Panuela had carried on his fur trade from here, and to one side of the *placita* was the big fur press, surrounded by a few swart beaver plews. A willow spread its shade over a bright-roofed well, and stables stood to the rear.

A pair of man-servants had lifted Panuela off Cole's mare and laid him on a Chimayo blanket spread on the ground. Carmencita Panuela knelt beside her father, sobbing hopelessly. She was exotic

even in her grief, with blue-black hair piled up under a white mantilla, the dark *robozo* around her shoulders showing her station by the quality of its weave—as did the corresponding *sarape* of a man.

Beside her stood Tomosito, the half-breed partner of Panuela. He was the son of a Spanish soldier and a Pueblo Indian mother. The intelligence and avarice of the Spaniard parent and the grim dogged patience of the Pueblo mother had combined to make a rare man of Tomosito. Seldom was a half-breed so well-educated, widely traveled—even more seldom was one so rich. He had carefully cultivated the manners of an aristocrat, and most men had forgotten he had once been a peon.

In deference to the girl's grief, Cole moved over beside his pack-horses, nodding for the half-bred to follow.

"What's this all about, Tomosito?" he asked in a low voice. "Why did Saunders try to stop me out there?"

Tomosito ran one buckskin-gloved hand up and down the edge of his red and blue *sarape,* folded across his left shoulder. The silver buttons of his tight, blackened leather leggins were unfastened to the knee, showing his immaculate white drawers beneath. His dark hawk-face—crownedly queued, jet-black hair—was turned to Cole with a faintly ironic smile.

"Señor Cole, it is unfortunate that you told Cimarron Saunders my partner was alive when you reached him," Tomosito said softly. "Right now, I wouldn't give a single peso for your life."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Journey to Hell

THE words sent a cold premonition clean through the trapper. And then, because he understood none of this, impatient anger thickened his voice.

"Look here, Tomosito, I've been away all season. Make it clear, will you? What have I got that Saunders wants?"

"It isn't only Saunders who wants what you have," said the half-breed. "Word will leak out, and within a week every *maldito,* every cut-throat north of Durango, will be seeking you."

He turned to glance at the servants who had lifted Panuela and were carrying him into the house. Carmencita rose, still sobbing softly. She turned and came over to stand beside Tomosito, dark eyes filled with grief. The half-breed turned back to Cole.

"A lot has happened since you left last spring, *Señor* Cole. Some Texan named Mier led a military expedition into Mexico. It so angered Presidente Santa Anna that he ordered Governor Armijo to close the Santa Fe Trail to the Yankees. That meant Esperanza and I couldn't ship our furs to St. Looey. The furs kept coming in though, mounting to such alarming proportions that I finally went to Mexico City, trying to find a market there. But the prices were so far below those we get from the Yankees that it was absurd to consider them. While I was gone, Panuela evidently decided to hide the furs . . ."

"He had to," interrupted the girl in a choked voice. "We had gathered over two hundred thousand dollars worth of pelts here. Saunders must have found out, somehow. When he came to town, father knew we weren't even safe in our own house as long as those furs were stored in the *placita.* He began taking loads out at night. He wouldn't even tell me where he was caching the furs. And the servants that went with him were sworn to kill themselves rather than reveal the hiding place."

"They kept their word," said Cole. "I came across their bodies on the Pecuris Trail. They'd all shot themselves. Your father wasn't so lucky. There was signs of a fight, and tracks leading away, so I cached my pack animals and followed 'em. Come across those hombres torturing your father just north of the Pecos. They'd been using the garrote—"

He stopped, with the ugly memory of it. The men had used a rawhide hobble for the garrote. They had tied it around Panuela's head above his eyes, thrusting a short length of hickory through it, twisting tighter and tighter until the rawhide had been sunk deep into the old man's flesh.

Cole had heard of younger, stronger men than Penuela cracking under the garrote. Yet the old man evidently hadn't divulged his secret, and he'd even re-

tained enough coherence to speak those few words to Cole before he died. Carmencita was making a gallant effort to control her grief, biting her full underlip, twisting her handkerchief.

"My brother," she asked, "you—you found him, too?"

"Manuel?" said Cole. "No, I didn't see hide nor hair of him. And I still don't see how this affects me."

"Señor Cole," said Tomosito. "You have sold furs to Panuela for years, have wintered in his hacienda, have been one of his best friends. And you told Saunders that he was alive when you reached him. Wouldn't it be logical for Saunders to conclude that Panuela told you where his cache was? In other words, you are, to all intents and purposes, the only man in the world who knows where two hundred thousand dollars worth of beaver pelts are hidden!"

For a moment, the only sound was the quiet bubbling of the little rivulet that ran through the *placita.* Then Tomosito leaned forward with that soft smile, and his veiled eyes held a sudden eagerness, almost a greed.

"Esperanza Panuela *did* tell you where those furs are, did he not, Senor Cole?"

Cole might have answered without hesitation, but his glance had gone beyond Tomosito to the girl. Something else beside grief was in her face. She was staring intently at Cole in a silent plea . . . or warning.

"Well," said Tomosito.

Cole untied the arrowhead from one of the whangs that formed the fringe on his leggins. Still trying to fathom that look in the girl's eyes, he held the bit of agatized rock out to Tomosito.

"Esperanza told me to take this to Carmencita. That's all he could get out before he died."

Cole had expected disappointment in the half-breed. But Tomosito masked whatever he felt, taking the arrowhead, turning it over and over in his gloved hand.

*"Pues,"* said the girl dully. "It's only an arrowhead—the kind you can find in any of the deserted pueblos."

Tomosito nodded. *"Si.* Obviously Panuela wouldn't cache his furs in an inhabited pueblo. If this means he hid them in one of those deserted villages, it doesn't help us much. There are hundreds of them throughout the province. It would take us a life-time to search them all."

"You know how the jewelry and blankets of each pueblo vary slightly," said Cole. "The arowheads must have some small differences too. Isn't there some *viejo,* some old man among your people, who would be able to tell that difference?"

Tomosito's face darkened momentarily —he didn't like to be reminded of his Pueblo blood. Then, as swiftly, his soft smile returned.

"It is our only chance, isn't it?" he said. "There are some *viejos* at Acoma who might know. It is several day's ride south of here."

The girl moved closer to Cole. "You will go there with us, señor, you will help us? It isn't the furs so much. It's Manuel, my brother. He was with father, and if you didn't find him he may still be alive, may still be out there somewhere."

"You are in this as deeply as we, Señor Cole," said Tomosito. "For until those furs are found, your life won't be safe one minute of the day."

Cole could see Tomosito's point. Yet, it wasn't the furs, really, that drew Cole into this so inextricably. It was the girl.

Carmencita Panuela's vivid Latin beauty was as famous in this northern province as was the strength in Painter Cole's hands. Cole's uglines set him apart from other men, but his reactions to a beautiful woman were normal enough. Every *caballero* in Santa Fe was in love with Carmencita—why should Painter Cole be an exception? He had never revealed his feelings, knowing too well how she must regard him, she, who but with a single smile could have had the handsomest, richest aristocrat in the whole province.

Yet now, with the girl standing there so close to him, her eyes filled with that plea, he knew he was more deeply involved than Tomosito could conceive.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll ride with you."

*"'Sta bueno,"* said the half-breed. "We'll start tonight. Perhaps we can give Saunders the slip."

"I'm going, too," said Carmencita.

"One Panuela is already dead," said Tomosito. "You'd better stay here."

Her chin tilted. "My brother is out

there somewhere, and they are my furs as much as yours, now, Señor Tomosito." Tomosito didn't raise his voice, but it had suddenly lost its softness. "Señorita Panuela, I forbid you to go."

Cole was amazed that the girl had been able to control her grief even this long. All the fight suddenly went out of her. She turned swiftly toward the house, and her shoulders were shaking with sobs beneath the dark *robozo* as she went through the door. Tomosito watched her go, and in his smoldering eyes was none of the normal admiration or desire a man should feel for such a woman—only a cold, impersonal speculation. It irritated Cole strangely.

★

A SICKLE moon cast eerie yellow light across the plaza. Painter Cole stood in the deep gloom of the *zaguan,* behind him Tomosito and the *mozos* he had picked to ride to Acoma.

These New Mexican haciendas had been built to act as forts as well as houses: Their exteriors were grim, slit-like windows piercing walls at infrequent intervals, the number of doorways kept to a minimum. Invariably, there was only one gateway large enough to permit the passage of horses and the solid-wheeled *carretas.* This *zaguan* was the only way out for Cole and the others.

Cimarron Saunders had taken over a house on the south side of the plaza, turning it into his own private *cantina.* Sounds of drunken revelry came to the men standing in the *zaguan*—a thick voice singing some obscene ditty of the wild Mizzou, a raucous laugh. Tomosito called to the sharp-faced *mozo* who squatted on the roof of a shed, peering over the wall.

"Well, Jarales, can you see any of Saunders' men?"

Jarales had been Tomosito's servant for many years. His vacant, glazed stare and his slack-lipped mouth revealed a weakness for the peyote bean, a drug which was a religion with the Indians, a vice with Jarales.

"Si," he said. "Saunders himself is in the house drinking. But he has left a whole army of his *demonios* waiting for us. Pablo Rodriguez and that Apache are on the roof of Don Joe's house across the street. Valzabar and some others are hanging around where the Pecuris comes into the plaza. It would be suicide to go out there now."

"Saunders is just the kind of *kyesh* to wait for me all the rest of his natural life. We might as well try to get through tonight as anytime," said Cole, turning to a Navajo servant who stood by the iron door. "Open up when I give the word."

Cole's mare was jaded from the long trip out of the mountains, and Tomosito had given him a magnificent black from the stables. Jamming a Ute moccasin into the stirrup, Cole swung aboard. He settled into the rawhide-rigged Spanish saddle, holding his long Jake Hawkins rifle parallel to the horse so it wouldn't catch in the doorway. Unlashing a braided quirt from the saddle-skirt, he waited until the soft creak of leather behind had quit, telling him all were mounted.

He turned to the Navajo. "Open the gate."

The iron hinges creaked, the grille swung back. Cole raised his quirt and laid it into the black. The stallion leaped forward, shooting from the darkness of the *zaguan* into the moonlit plaza. Bending low over the huge silver-mounted pommel, Cole swung in rhythm to the pounding hooves. And suddenly from the rooftop across the way came Pablo Rodriguez' hoarse voice:

"C-e-e-marron, *esta que diablo,* Cole. C-e-e-marron!"

Shots followed, loud, thunderous. Lead kicked up red clay all about Cole, plucking at his leggins and whizzing by his head. His mount was in full gallop now, black flanks rippling, magnificent barrel heaving beneath the trapper's tight-held knees. If the horse had as much bottom as it had speed, Cole felt capable of outrunning anything Saunders could fork.

Above the pound of hoofs behind, he could hear the drunken curses of Cimarron Saunders as he lurched out of the house he had taken over, cursing his men for fools and bellowing for horses.

Three men loomed up in front of Cole suddenly, jumping out from behind the terraced house that fronted on the Pecuris Trail. The hombre in front raised his

London Fusil, a deadly weapon at that close range. But Cole had already dropped his quirt, and gripped his Jake Hawkins in both hands, leaning far out in the saddle and swinging viciously.

Flesh and bone pulped beneath Cole's blows. The London Fusil exploded harmlessly in the air as the screaming man slammed back against a mud wall. The other two scrambled desperately from beneath the hoofs of that careening black. The trapper caught a flash of Enrique Valzabar's contorted face. Then the youth, whose clan boasted nothing but murderers since Onate, was behind Cole, and the trapper was racing through the narrow lane that led between the last outlying hovels.

Free of the town, Cole eased straighter in the saddle, pulling his horse into a steady gallop, allowing Tomosito to catch up with him.

*"Valgame Dios,"* panted the haf-breed. "I thought you wouldn't get through those last three men on the south side."

He put his still-smoking Adams self-cocker back into a tooled holster that rode his blackened leggins in a stiff, unfamiliar way. He had always been the one to let others do the gunning.

"Did we lose any men?" asked Cole.

"One," said Tomosito. "I hope they killed him. I wouldn't want Cimarron Saunders to get him alive."

They rode southward across the plain surrounding Taos, through flats covered by the ubiquitous greasewood. It grew colder as they climbed the pass through the Taos mountains, wending through stunted cedars, hoofs muted by the grama grass that matted the ancient trail to the Pecuris pueblo.

It was near dawn when they reached the place where Cole had found Panuela's three dead *mazos*. He indicated the rocky mounds where he had buried them.

The trapper knew how useless it would be to try and hide their trail permanently from Tanay and Saunders' other Apache trackers. So he led the little cavalcade through the ford of the Pecos and about a mile beyond. Then he sought hard ground where their hoofs would show less marks, cutting off the Pecuris at right angles, riding a quarter-mile up the slope through scrub-oak and pamilla. There he made another right angle turn, riding back toward the river, paralleling the trail below.

Tomosito urged his mustang up beside Cole. "Why do you turn back?"

"We'll wait above the ford for Saunders to pass us. Then we'll head downriver in the water. Those Apaches'll have one helluva time figuring which way we went in that river, won't they?"

He halted them in a clearing above the Pecos, screened my juniper and stunted pine, where they could see but could not be seen. Everyone dismounted, easing girths to blow the horses. The sky was turning light with coming day, and Cole became aware that Tomosito had been watching his men with a peculiar intensity. The half-breed spoke, almost to himself.

"I thought one of my *hombres* was shot. That should leave only three. Yet here we have four."

One stood apart from the others, facing away from Cole and Tomosito, face hidden by the huge roll-brim sombrero that was tilted down low in front. Tomosito took three swift steps and jerked that big hat off.

Cole had never seen the half-breed display so much emotion before.

*"Por Dios,"* he gasped. *"Carmencita!"*

THE girl's blue-black hair had been piled into the crown of the sombrero. It fell down about her shoulders as she whirled to face Tomosito,

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cheeks coloring. She had donned a man's leggins and tight charro jacket, and she looked smaller in them, somehow.

"I told you I was coming," she cried defiantly. "It's too late to send me back now!"

The half-breed recovered his composure. He stepped back, smiling softly.

"Oh no, *sancha mia,* it isn't too late. Jarales, Rudolfo, take Señorita Panuela back to Taos. Avoid Saunders. Use your own judgment if she gives you trouble."

The girl backed up against her skittish pony. Her glance went past Tomosito to Cole, towering there above the others, the ugliness of his face softened a little in the dim light. He had seen the same strange plea in her big dark eyes when Tomosito had asked him about Panuela, back there in the *placita.* This time he didn't try to fathom it. He just answered it, stepping forward and speaking in a quiet way.

"If the señorita wants to go that bad, Tomosito, I think we should let her."

Tomosito turned from the girl to Cole, running his hand up and down his sarape.

"Since Esperanza's death, Señor Cole, I feel a keen responsibility for his daughter. A responsibility, I may say, in which you have no share. . ."

His glance licked momentarily toward his three men, and they took on a new significance for Cole. Most of the servants in the hacienda served Esperanza Panuela. But these three *mozos* had always belonged to Tomosito. And manservant was a weak translation of the word *mozo.* A servant does not die for his master, or kill for his master, or belong to his master body and soul.

The degenerate Pueblo Indian, Jarales, stood with his vacant stare fixed on Cole. He wore a pair of silver-plated Remingtons, and the way he caressed their ornate handles reminded Cole of a cat sharpening its claws on a tree.

Rudolfo was from the pueblo of Isleta, a hulking brute with a wit as thick as his solid, square torso. The third *mozo,* Gaspar, Tomosito had brought up with him from Mexico City—a sly little ferret who mimicked his master's way of speaking and smiling and laughing, who seemed to miss nothing with his constantly shifting, beady eyes.

"The girl goes back, Señor Cole," purred Tomosito. "I think you understand how unwise it would be for you to force the issue."

The ugly trapper tried to watch them all at once as he let his hand move down toward his Paterson five-shot. The girl was beautiful, and Tomosito's soft smile angered Cole, and unwise or not, he was going to force the issue.

Gaspar snapped the electric tension with his call. "Cimarron Saunders is coming!"

As one, they turned toward the trail below. Tomosito had been right in saying every *maldito* north of Durango would be after Cole. Saunders had gathered a veritable army.

Leading was Tanay, the Mescelaro Apache morning light glinting on the gold watch chains dangling from his ears. With him were the other trackers, lean greyhounds of men on rawhide mustangs. They rode like avaricious hawks, bending low from side to side, scanning the trail. Following the Apaches was Saunders, forking a great raking dun that was harnessed like a Crow bride's horse. The reins and headstall dripped hawk's-bells, the saddle was gaudy with red and blue hair tassels, the *tapaderos* plated solid with silver.

The red-haired poacher was drunk as sin, swaying dangerously back and forth. Supporting him on one side was Pablo Rodriguez in his dragoon's coat, and on the other, Enrique Valzabar. As the trio splashed through the ford, Saunders lurched sideways, almost falling from his dun. His violent cursing was quite audible to those on the slope.

"Hold me up, damn you! I'm blind drunk and I know it, but I'm gettin' that devil, Cole, if you have to tie me in a shaddle. Hold me up. . ."

Behind, came Claude Tate and his renegade trappers, wild mountain-men with smooth-bore rifles and wolfskin hats, who found it easier to poach their pelts than to get them with trap and "beaver medicine." There were bandidos from the Border too, in braided charro suits and heavily glazed sombreros, and a motley bunch of Indians and breeds in dirty buckskins and tattered bayeta blankets. Dangerous men, bandits, killers—the choicest bunch of cut-throats the province could offer.

"And they are all after you, Señor Cole," murmured Tomosito as the last rider disappeared down the trail. "Cimarron Saunders who wants you badly enough to ride blind drunk in his saddle, and Tanay who cuts the ears off the men he kills, and Enrique Valzabar who would be ashamed if he had an honest man among his ancestors. They are all after you."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Blood-Sacrifice for Acoma Gods

COLE turned to the half-breed, expecting to take up where they had left off about Carmencita. But Tomosito stepped calmly to his horse, tightened the cinch, swung aboard. His three *mozos* followed suit.

Apprehensively, the trapper mounted his black, looking for an instant to Carmencita. She smiled faintly at him. His twisted, perpetual grin spread a little in return. With a shrug, he led down toward the river. It was probably the oldest way in the world of covering a trail. No horse left tracks in two feet of water. Saunders would either have to split his force, sending some upriver, some down, or he would have to make a guess at which way Cole headed. Either procedure would give Cole a head start.

Late in the afternoon of that first day, the trapper turned west from the Pecos and headed across the Santa Fe plateau, with its detached buttes and lava-capped mesas. The waters of the Rio Grande hid their tracks again, as they turned south once more. And after riding up out of the Rio Grande and into the great mesa country, they reached Acoma late in the second day.

The cynical Tomosito had doubtlessly seen Acoma—the Sky City—before. Yet he seemed impressed, nevertheless, as the cavalcade topped the cedar-studded rise and suddenly looked westward across the lush strip of pastureland to the dark mesa upon which Acoma was built. The afternoon sun cast the erosion-shaped mesa into red and purple lights that tinted castles with delicate minarets and imposing towers, and shone weirdly on rock formations and twisted abutments.

The Acomans farmed in the valley at the foot of their mesa, and as Cole and the others neared the fields, runners in white cotton trousers could be seen preceding them up an ancient trail.

Tomosito dismounted from his mustang at the foot of that trail. "This is the Horse Trail, Señor Cole. But it is hard enough to get a fresh mount up, much less *caballos* as jaded as ours."

A crowd was waiting for them at the top, short, dark-faced men in white cotton trousers of buckskin leggins, jet-black hair done up in the *chongo*—the traditional Oriental queue of the Pueblo tribes.

Carmencita moved up beside the trapper. "I don't like this. They are all so quiet—and where are the women?"

Cole searched the crowd, and couldn't mark one squaw among the men. His big hand grew tighter about his Jake Hawkins rifle. The Pueblos were the most peaceful of all the tribes. Yet, the silence of these men held a strangely sullen hostility.

A huge wooden cross was planted to one side of the trail at the very top, and before it stood a man in a rich bayeta blanket that hung to the knees of his white cotton trousers. He had a narrow, finely-shaped nose, and his dark seamed face formed a striking contrast to the pure white of his long hair. There was something about his appearance that tantalized Cole, as if he had known him somewhere before, and couldn't quite remember.

Tomosito spoke swiftly in Keresan, the language of the Acomans. The white-haired old man answered almost angrily, narrow eyes flashing. Tomosito turned to Cole.

"He is Almagre, the chief. We have come at a bad time. One of their young men defiled the old gods and they were preparing the ceremony for his death. But Almagre says he will see us."

The white-haired leader had already turned and the crowd parted for him. Cole followed, looking from one stolid face to another. The Acoman's eyes were veiled, their faces illegible. He felt almost transparent—as if they were looking through him, supremely ignorant of his presence. It was an eerie, disconcerting sensation.

Suddenly someone's soft, small hand was thrust into his. He looked down into Carmencita's pale face, the perfume of her midnight hair coming to him faintly. Something thickened in his throat.

"I'm afraid," she said quietly. "And right now I think I'd rather have you here than all the caballeros in Santa Fe."

She had never looked that way at him before, a long, studying look, up from beneath her lashes. It made him feel awkward, and he turned away to look at the buildings.

There were three long blocks of houses, an alleyway separating one from the next. Each house was three stories high, and each story was terraced back from the one below, giving the effect of giant steps. There were no doors in the lowest story. Rickety piñon ladders leaned against the walls; the chief was climbing one, amazingly agile for such an old man.

Cole helped the girl up before him, and Tomosito followed with his three *mozos*. The silence oppressed Cole. He knew there were half a hundred of those sullen-eyed Acomans behind him, yet not one made a sound. Almagre led them up another ladder to the third story, stooping through a low doorway. Tomosito stopped Cole with a hand on his arm.

"You had better leave your rifle outside. Things are touchy enough as it is."

Cole leaned the Jake Hawkins reluctantly against the wall. Feeling as naked without that rifle as without his leggins, he went through the doorway, holding his breath instinctively as he entered the semi-dark room. It was larger than he had thought, with Moqui-woven blankets and cougar-skin bow-cases hanging from pegs in the wall. The chief or *cacique*—had seated himself on a Navajo rug, drawing his bayeta about him. He turned to Cole, speaking in Spanish.

"We have heard of you, Señor Cole, and of your hands. My nephew tells me of an arrowhead you have."

His nephew! Cole's glance swept from Almagre to Tomosito, and he knew why the *cacique's* appearance had so tantalized him. The similarity between uncle and nephew was quite apparent—the same beaklike nose, the strange fire smoldering deep down in narrow, veiled eyes. Yet, in his wanderings, Cole had seen enough fanatical shamans and medicine men among the Sioux and Cheyenne to recognize the slubtle difference in the old man and the young one. That deep-seated flame in the *cacique's* eyes was a consuming fanaticism—the glow in Tomosito's was lit with the greed of his Spanish father.

The trapper tried to remember whether it had been Tomosito or himself who had suggested coming to Acoma. Behind him was a growing undertone, a constant shift and movement that had been going on ever since he entered. Feeling a pressure of bodies, Cole turned. Half the room was filled with young men, eyeing him with that impersonal hostility. They formed a solid wall between him and the door. And there was no other exit. A group of the Pueblos had separated Carmencita from the trapper, forcing her over against the side wall. Cole made a half-move toward her, but Tomosito's voice stopped him.

"The arrowhead, Señor Cole."

Cole unknotted the whang, held out his hand with the sharp agatized arrowhead. With an astounded, undrawn breath, Almagre leaped to his feet, throwing his *bayeta* off, jerking away from Cole's hand.

"The Accursed Lakes," he screamed. "Abo, Quarai, Ti-ba-ra! You have defiled the Forbidden Land—"

Then he broke into a torrent of Keresan, shouting at the Acoman's behind Cole. The trapper whirled, with the feel of rough hands on him.

He dove for his Paterson. But an Indian grabbed his arm. Another yanked the gun from its holster. Cole jerked from side to side, biting, kicking, butting. The sheer weight of them drove him down.

On his knees, he got his big trap-scarred hands round one Acoman's neck. He twisted viciously, and something snapped, and the man sagged against him.

That was all, though. The hard floor was against his back, now, and the bodies of half a dozen men were struggling all over him. Their shouts were loud in his ears. Their smell was strong—the odor of rich earth from the fields, and of old leather, and of sweat. From somewhere muffled, came Carmencita's terrified scream.

"Cole, Cole!"

He was sorry he couldn't help her. She had counted on him. Her voice was the

last thing he heard. Something struck him on the head, and sound and smell and sensation faded into nothingingess.

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HIS body held down by the thousand hands of an overpowering lethargy, Cole finally struggled up. From somewhere in the darkness he heard a groan—and realized it was his own. Then someone beside him spoke.

"Ah, señor, you have come to. You were unconscious all night."

He didn't recognize the voice, and because he had always been a simple, straightforward man anyway, he asked, "Where am I?"

"You are in the *kiva,* señor," said the other, "the ceremonial chamber. Only the *caciques,* or those who are to die, ever see this room."

Cole was silent a moment, trying to move his arms, his legs. Rawhide held his hands tightly behind his back, and lashed his feet rigidly. He heard someone breathing on his other side.

"That you, Carmencita?"

"Si," she said in a small voice. "They are going to kill us, Cole. You broke an Acoman's neck up there in that room, with those hands of yours. They were going to finish you then, but Tomosito and Almagre pursuaded them to wait."

"Is that why you were afraid of Tomosito?" he asked.

"Dios, no," she said. "How could I know he was up to this? I don't know exactly why I did fear him. He was always so soft and cultured, so perfect a caballero. He never did anything to arouse my suspicions. Yet, there was always something in his eyes, a cruelty. And the way he smiled, as if he were waiting for something, biding his time. Maybe this is what he was waiting for."

She didn't say anymore, and the gloom held the three of them for a moment. Finally Cole turned back to the man on his other side.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm Leandro Baca," the man answered. "Almagre had wanted to get rid of me for a long time. Most of the Pueblos, you see, pay homage to two sets of gods—Tata Dios, the Spaniard's god, and the Trues, our old gods. But Almagre and his followers want to go completely back to the old gods. They would destroy our church and the cross at the head of the Horse Trail. They have gained too much strength here in Acoma; little by little, those who oppose them have disappeared. Like me—when I wandered into the Accursed Lakes country and brought back the things I found in Ti-ba-ra, Almagre said I had defiled the old gods and, according to ancient custom, must die."

"Didn't Almagre yell something about the Accursed Lakes when I handed him that arrowhead?" asked Cole.

"Si," said Carmencita. "He said 'Abo, Quarai, Ti-ba-ra.' "

"They are the three dead cities of the Accursed Lakes," said Leandro Baca. "In Ti-ba-ra dwells the *brujo*—a witch. I heard of him from some wandering Apaches, but I didn't believe them. I was inside the ruins when I heard him laugh. It was terrible . . . "

Someone fumbled with the trap-door in the roof and Leandro stopped, squirmed over to Cole, his voice coming swiftly.

"Señor, Almagre took away the stone axe and the knives I brought back from Ti-ba-ra. But he didn't get what I tied into my *chongo*. I've been trying to think of a way to get it for days. If you could reach it, maybe you could saw through your bonds."

He twisted his head down by Cole's hands. Cole shifted his hips until his fingers brushed against the coarse black hair of Leandro's queue. The trap opened, shooting a beam of sunlight into the *kiva,* blinding Cole. He worked his fingers into the *chongo* as someone's legs appeared on the ladder. Something hard and sharp rasped against Cole's thumb. He closed his hand around it, grunting. Leandro jerked his head away.

And when Tomosito turned on the ladder to look at them, they were lying as before. Only now, some ancient tapering stone implement from Ti-ba-ra pressed its sharp edges into the trappers calloused palm. Almagre came behind Tomosito, followed by a pair of hard-looking Acomans in white cotton pantaloons. The light gave Cole his first real look at Leandro Baca.

He was young-looking, wearing nothing

but a faded cloth about his loins. His rangy body with its deep chest and flat belly had the hound-dog look that came to these wanderers who spent most of their life on the trail. His intelligent face was haggard, hollow-cheeked, and there was a tortured look to his dark eyes.

Tomosito smiled at Cole. "I would have done this at Panuela's hacienda, but there were too many of his *mozos* around. You must admit I tried to dissuade Señorita Panuela—she could have stayed in Taos and avoided all this. *Pues,* I suppose one couldn't expect both beauty and brains. As to your story of the arrowhead, Senor Cole, even Panuela wouldn't have been fool enough to cache his furs in the Accursed Lakes country. He knows the superstitions of the Pueblos about that place. His servants were Pueblos—I doubt if they would approach within twenty miles of Ti-ba-ra. So you are going to let us know what Panuela really told you before he died."

Cole lurched up against his bonds. "What I told you was the truth, dammit . . . "

He stopped. Tomosito had slipped off a buckskin glove, revealing the ugly bullet-wound in his right hand. He saw the understanding in Cole's eyes, and his smile was no longer soft.

"*Si,*" he said. "It was I you disturbed with Panuela, there on the Pecuris Trail. We were three against your one, Jarales, Rudolfo and I. Perhaps we could have discouraged you. But, until I found those furs, I wasn't ready to be recognized as anyone but Esperanza's loyal, honest, soft-spoken partner."

"How could you do that to my father?" cried the girl. "He was your best friend. If it hadn't been for him, you'd still be nothing but a half-way educated peon!"

He turned to her, the fire burning brighter in his eyes, his words sharp, contemptuous. "Do you think I spent all those years working my way into partnership because your father was my friend? Bah—he was a way to the top, that's all. I was patient, señorita. I waited a long time. But then two hundred thousand dollars worth of furs is worth waiting for, isn't it? Cimarron Saunders would murder for it. Perhaps I would too. I was returning from Mexico, and Esperanza must have been coming back from where he was hiding his furs, when we met there on the Pecos. I suppose he had begun to suspect me—he was reluctant about telling where his cache was. When gentler methods failed, Jarales did the honors, as he will do now . . . "

The renegade had followed Almagre's two young bucks in. All the hombres in the province carried strips of rawhide around their horse's neck to hobble the animals at night. Jarales had one of those hobbles now, a slit in one end, a wooden button on the other. It was the same device they had used to form the garrote for Esperanza Panuela.

Jarales slipped it around Cole's head, punching the button through the slit, drawing the rawhide tight. Then he produced a short length of hickory, slipping it beneath the hobble. Throughout the process he muttered an idiotic little chant.

"*Si, si,* Señor Cole, sooner or later they talk for Jarales, sooner or later. If not the garrote, then the bastinado, or the wet rawhide. Si, si, Señor Cole, sooner or later . . . "

He had been at the peyote bean. His eyes were glazed, his face set, pale. And he began to twist that length of hickory. With each turn of his hand, the garrote drew tighter. Sweat began to drip into Cole's eyes, salty, blinding. Tomosito bent forward.

"Well, Señor Cole, will you tell us now?"

Cole didn't answer. Pain beat through his head in roaring waves. It took a terrible effort of will for him to concentrate on working that sharp piece of rock around in his fingers. Almagre's men stood by, ready to hold him if he struggled. Jarales took another turn.

"Si, si, Señor, sooner or later . . . "

The white-haired Almagre bent forward. His eyes were filled with a cruel eagerness to see this white man snap beneath the torture. Blood trickled down Cole's chin from where he was biting his lips. But he had that piece of rock against the rawhide on his wrists, now. Slowly, patiently, he began rubbing its sharp edge across the leather bonds. Jarales twisted once more.

Tomosito began pacing up and down, lips compressed with the effort to control

his growing impatience. Cole's body was filled with agony. His head seemed to swell like a balloon. The muscles across his stomach twitched with nervous reaction, and a terrible nausea swept him. Then a strip of his bonds seemed to give beneath his hidden sawing.

The girl's eyes were fixed on Cole, her bosom rising and falling, her cheeks streaked with tears. Tomosito stopped pacing, whirling to the trapper.

"Are you inhuman? *Valgame Dios.* I've seen Apaches break before this. Tell me, where are the furs?"

Jarales took another turn. The girl could stand it no longer. She struggled to sit up, screaming:

"Stop it you fools! Con't you see he'll never talk. He's no Apache. He's Painter Cole. Haven't you heard of Painter Cole?"

She began to laugh hysterically, then broke into hopeless sobbing, sinking down. And then Cole too began laughing, a dry, cracked laugh. The rawhide strands had parted. His hands were free.

It infuriated Tomosito, that laughter. Face twisted with rage, he bent forward, slapping Cole on one side of the face and then the other, back and forth, back and forth, lean torso jerking from side to side with each blow. Cole fought down the desire to reach out and smash the half-breed's avaricious face. He conuld never hope to overcome them all—it would only be throwing away his chance of escape. So he sat there and took it until Tomosito stopped. The half-breed straightened, finally, trembling with rage.

And through the roaring in his head, Cole heard the small, growing sound in the pueblo outside. Feet pounded by the kiva A shot rang out. Then an Acoman appeared at the open trap-door, shouting in Keresan. Tomosito's voice was harsh, astounded.

"Cimarron Saunders. He is here on the mesa!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### War!

ALMAGRE was the first to break for the ladder, followed by his two men. Tomosito went up last, shouting for Jarales to stay and guard Cole. The renegade still squatted beside the trapper, leering vacantly, mumbling that crazy chant.

"If not the garrote, then most certainly the bastinado . . ."

He broke off suddenly. Cole had drawn his hands from behind his back.

The trapper lunged up, reaching long arms for Jarales. With a wild scream, the renegade threw himself backward, and Cole's fingers scraped down his buckskins, closing over the hilt of Jarale's big Green River knife. Then Jarales was slamming back against the wall, and Cole was left swaying there on his knees, a handful of buckskin fringe in one hand, the Green River in the other.

Jarales hit the wall, shoved himself away from it, grabbing for his silver-mounted Remingtons. Legs still tied, Cole jerked up off his knees, and before he fell again, launched himself full length at the Pueblo, knife blade gleaming and held out in front of him.

With both guns jerking from their holsters, and thumbs catching at the hammers, Jarales took that knife. It went in hilt deep, Cole crashing in after it. . . .

The trapper picked himself off the dead body, pulling the Green River free. Blood still on its blade, he cut the bonds off his feet. Then he stumbled over to the girl, slashing her free. Leandro Baca's rawhide had dug deep into his flesh, and Cole took longer with him. When he had finished, the girl worked the garrote off his head, laughing a little, crying.

"I told Tomosito he couldn't break you . . . ."

Fresh pain shot through his head as she loosened the hobble, and his fists tightened spasmodically. Something dug into his palm. He was still holding that piece of rock Leandro had given him. The girl stopped working at the garrote when he opened his hand. There was a catch of excitement to her voice.

"That's the same kind of arrowhead my father gave you."

Yes, it was the same kind—the long tapering point, the singular haft, with its serrated sides. And Leandro said he'd gotten this from Ti-ba-ra.

Renewed firing outside raised Cole's head. He tied the arrowhead into a whang, as he had done the other. Then he rose

and went to Jarales. He would need those two Remingtons, with Cimarron Saunders out on the mesa. He buckled the belt around his own lean flanks, spinning the cylinder of each gun to check the loads. Then he stooped to lift Leandro Baca.

"No, señor," gasped the young Acoman. "I've been tied up so long I can't even walk. Yon'd never get away if you tried to take me along."

Cole put his big hands under Baca without answering, and swung the youth onto his broad shoulder. Carmencita helping from behind, he finally reached the top of the ladder.

The *kiva* was really a cellar, its roof only a few feet above the ground level. Its mud sides extended a foot or so higher than the roof, forming a low wall. Cole shoved Leandro out ahead of him, and then climbed through the trap, helping the girl out. Lying on their bellies, hidden from the street by that wall, they could see the whole thing.

Cimarron Saunders would be the one to do it this way—he had always boasted he would poach furs from the devil if he could find hell. The red-headed poacher led his whole cut-throat crew up from the south end of the mesa, shooting, yelling, smashing what little opposition the Acomans put up.

Three of Saunders men lay in a heap down by the church, arrows protruding from their bodies. Half a dozen Acomans lay sprawled farther on, sun glinting on their white cotton trousers. But the Pueblos had no guns, and Saunders had everything almost his own way.

The walls of the houses were like those of the *kiva,* extended a foot or so above roof level, forming a low barricade. From behind this rose a desperate Acoman, bowstring making a deadly twang. So swift was he that four arrows had left his bow before the elephantine Pablo Rodriguez turned and shot him from the roof. And down in the dusty street Enrique Valzabar, the man who would be ashamed if he had an honest man among his ancestors, crumpled suddenly, four shafts studding the chest of his fancy charro jacket.

Saunders kept right on coming, his pistol in one hairy hand, his *saca tripas* in the other, shouting:

"I've come to getcha, Cole. I know you're here. You might as well come out now. I've come to getcha . . . "

"Wonder where Almagre and Tomosito disappeared to?" muttered Cole.

"Almagre and his fanatics are probably gathering in those ceremonial chambers on the top terrace," said Leandro. "Can't you hear the *tombe?*"

Cole looked up toward the last story of the block of houses. He could see the dim shift of white-clad warriors in the doorways. And he could hear the *tombe,* now, the awesome-sounding ceremonial drum of the Aconmans, like a monotonous, insistent pulse in his head.

"Saunders is between us and the Horse Trail. Isn't there any other way down from the mesa?" he asked.

"The old North Trail, around behind the houses," said Leandro. "But it is reached from the alley between the middle black and this one. He cuts us off from that trail, too."

"If I showed myself on the roofs," said Cole, "Saunders would come up after me, and that'd put him right in Almagre's hands. While they were cutting each other up, you two could slip around the front of the houses to that alley."

Carmencita grabbed his arm. "Don't be a fool. You would be up there too, right in the middle of it. And Tomosito is somewhere around. You'd never get out alive."

"For ten years, up in the Big Horns," he said, "I've been playing hide-and-seek with hombres who take off your hair when they catch you. And I've still got my hair, haven't I?"

He shoved one of Jarales' silver-mounted Remingtons into the girl's hand. "I'm goin' now. Don't wait too long for me at the North Trail."

Cole rose to a crouch, slipped over the low wall and dropped to the ground. Along the front of the pueblo were ladders that led to the second story. He was almost to the first one when Pablo Rodriguez sighted him.

"C-e-e-marron!" shouted the huge, blue-coated hombre. "There ees Cole! C-e-e-marron!"

Cole had the other Remington out then. And Pablo was no fool. He threw his fat body into the street, Cole's slug whining over his floppy-brimmed sombrero. The

trapper didn't wait for another shot. The rickety pinon ladder swayed and creaked beneath his weight. Saunders let out an enraged bellow, running forward, shooting.

Slugs pounded adobe around Cole. He threw himself onto the roof, rolling over with his gun ready—the Acomans were looking for him too. But the only Acomans he saw were the dead ones, forming white blotches on the dark, earthen roof.

Cole crawled across that first terrace and into a dark doorway, gun cocked. It was more sense than sight that told him someone else was in the room. His finger whitened against the trigger—then he expelled his breath in relief.

This, then, was where the Acomans had put their women. Two or three families of them were in the room, and there were probably more in the others. Old women, young women, children, all dressed in the black manta, the shawl worn over one shoulder and buttoned down the side with big silver clasps. They cowered against the wall, one or two moaning, frightened to death of that big, ugly man with the long black hair and the greasy clothes.

Outside, Saunders and his men made a raucous racket coming up the ladder and onto the roof. Cole slipped past the terrified women and into the next room.

These 'dobes had been built before the white man's advent into the country, before the Spaniard, when the bloody Apache had held all of the country above Mexico in a century-long grip of terror. The first-story rooms had no doors, their walls presenting a solid front to the street. They were used mainly to store things in, and trap-doors led down into them from the floor of the second-story chambers. Cole found the trap, lifted it and dropped through, allowing the heavy pine door to slam shut above him.

It was a short fall. He landed with bent knees, then straightened, stumbling through piles of rolled bayeta blankets, face brushing against twists of muskmelon and bunches of drying grapes that hung from the viga poles. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw trap-doors above him, one after the other. When he came to the last one at the other end of the block, he found a ladder and leaned it against the rafters. He climbed up, cautiously shoving open the heavy trap.

Saunders had left his mark—sprawled in the doorway was an Acoman, the white of his cotton shirt reddened by blood. Otherwise the room was empty. Cole catfooted to the outer door. Saunders' men were spreading across the first terrace, hesitant about entering those dark doors. They respected Painter Cole, and his guns, and his hands.

"I think he went in thees one, Ceemarron," said Rodriguez, waving his .44 at the last door.

"Nah," snarled Claude Tate, hitching at his Yankee galluses. "He went in the next one to it. I saw 'im."

"We'll bottle 'im up," called Saunders. "Each one o' you take a door. I'll stick my *saca tripas* through any man that lets 'im get away."

Carmencita and Leandro should have had time to reach the alley by now. Cole was thankful they would escape, anyway. The heavy river boots of Claude Tate thudded on the roof outside. Cole's palm grew moist against the silver-mounted handle of his gun. He cocked the hammer softly.

He had the sudden sense of an insistent pulse-beat stopping within him. And standing there with his thumb heavy on the Remington's hammer, it took him a long moment to realize the *tombe* had ceased. . . .

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A LONG, drawn-out, blood-chilling scream sounded from somewhere above Cole, followed by another and another until his ears rang with continuous sound. The roof over his head shook to a hundred bare feet charging across it. Almagre and his fanatics were sweeping down on Saunders, and Cole knew this moment was his chance for escape. He took a long step out the door, whirling to throw down on the first man he sighted.

Claude Tate had jerked his unshaven face toward the second terrace, but he must have caught sight of Cole from the corner of his eye. He turned, Jake Hawkins rifle pulled flat against his belly for a spot shot. Cole's finger tightened on his trigger, the Remington bucked up in his

hand and Tate fell forward on his face.

On past Tate were others of Saunders' crew, the bulk of them gathered at the far end of the terrace. If they saw Cole as he backed swiftly toward the alley, it didn't do them any good. For out of the windowless, third story ceremonial chambers, Almagre's fanatics were dropping like buzzards onto carrion. Half a hundred wild-eyed Acomans in flapping white trousers, armed with deadly shortbows. Leading was Almagre, his long white hair flowing out behind him, his dark face contorted. Saunders was caught in a nakedly exposed position there on the open roof of the first terrace. A stringy-haired mountain-man collapsed, cursing sickly, one arrow after the other driving deep into his greasy buckskins. A charro-coated Mexican whirled and raced for the ladder leading down into the street. A shaft caught him on the edge of the roof. He was suspended there for a moment, and three others studded his back. Then he toppled from sight, screaming.

Saunders proved his boast about poaching furs from the devil, then. Arrows filling the air about him, he stood calmly, emptying his gun into the mass of Indians, bellowing orders at his men. An arrow plunged into his thick leg and he went right on firing. Another caught in his right arm. He tore it out, cocking his gun for another shot at the same time.

And his men gathered around him. Pablo Rodriguez, shouting obscenities, triggering his .44. Tanay the Mescalero Apache, the watch-chains in his ears bobbing back and forth, his face dark with a traditional hatred for the Pueblo Indians. The mountain men, working their deadly smooth-bores, along with the *bandidos,* and the half-breeds. Standing together like that, their concentrated fire formed a solid wall of lead that swept away Almagre's first rank of fanatics. White-clad bodies fell over the edge of the second terrace and into Saunders' group. Others hung head down over the low wall. Still firing, the red-haired poacher began his retreat.

Then Cole didn't see any more. He sensed the alley's dark maw behind him, and turned.

Carmencita must have been standing on the top rung of a ladder. Her head and shoulders were above a low wall, and Jarales' other Remington was held grimly in both hands. At the look on Cole's face, she said angrily:

"*Pues,* did you think we would leave you alone up here? Pronto now, I didn't see Tomosito with Almagire. He's up to something."

Cole followed her down the ladder to where Leandro crouched at its bottom, rubbing his ankles, his wrists. Between them, Carmencita and Cole half-carried the Acoman down the narrow alley toward the rear of the houses. They broke into sunlight on the edge of the mesa, and the North Trail dropped down before them, a series of toe-holds on either side of a cleft in the precipice. Some circulation had come back into Leandro's legs and arms; he lowered himself hesitantly to the first steps, helped by Carmencita. Cole was about to let himself down when the scuffle of running feet echoed up the alley and three figures were suddenly silhouetted at the other end: Tomosito, Rudolfo, and Gaspar.

Cole's gun glinted a little in the sunlight as he brought it up, and Tomosito and Rudolfo threw themselves aside. Gaspir was behind them, and he hadn't caught that glimpse of shining steel. Cole's shot cracked out hard and flat between the mud walls. Gaspar went over backward.

The trapper waited for a moment, half-hoping Tomosito would show again. But the half-breed was too cautious. The rock was harsh against Cole's fingers. The cliff fell away below him, reeled dizzily above him. His hands were cut and bleeding by the time he reached the bottom of the first steps.

Carmencita and Leandro waited for him in an enormous amphitheater at the foot of a gigantic Buddha-like rock-formation, carved out by untold centuries of winds and rains. Leandro led them across the bowl, limping, hopping. Then they were climbing into another series of toe-holds, moving around a dome of sandstone, through towering abutments. Leandro slipped, cried out. The girl grabbed at him, caught his arm, slipped herself.

Cole flung out a moccasined foot, gasping, "Grab it!"

Her small hand closed around it and

the weight of two bodies dragged at him. His bloody fingers began slipping from the hand-holds. His right hand scraped out. He clawed desperately with his left, conscious of the terrible yawning space below.

Then the hand around his foot relaxed, was supporting him rather than pulling him down, as the girl found a foothold.

They reached a ledge that widened out at the far end, then climbed down a series of notched logs that led to the fields below. Panting, Cole leaned against the cliff, looking back up. It towered somberly above him. Tomosito and Rudolfo were miniature black figures descending the first series of hand-holds, far beyond the range of Cole's Remington.

"Things seem to point to the fact that Panuela cached his furs at Ti-ba-ra," said Cole. "How far is it from here, Leandro?"

"Three or four days ride over the Manzanos," said the Acoman.

"Will you guide us?"

"Señor," smiled the youth. "If you hadn't taken me out of that *kiva,* I wouldn't be guiding anybody anywhere. I'll be proud to show you Ti-ba-ra, witches and all!"

"Then let's get around to the horses before someone else beats us to it," said Cole.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Feast at the Dead Lakes

THE sun of the third day's ride was low when the three dropped down the last eastern slope of the Manzanos, riding through park-like pineries into a fringe of twisted cedars that bordered the plain. Cole had pushed hard, southeast from Acoma, following the San Jose to the Rio Grande, crossing the mother river and the upland bordering it to the east, gaining the jagged Banzanos the second day.

Saunders' horses had been at the foot of the Horse Trail, as well as the mounts Cole and Tomosito had left. The trapper rounded up a score of them to use as pack animals, stampeding the rest. That would give Cole a few hours start over Saunders, —if he got free of Acoma—and also over Tomosito.

Even Cole's magnificent black was weary now, moving out of the cedars in a dogged fashion, lather caking its flanks. Cole sat easy in the saddle, the lean cast of his long body somehow accentuated by the grueling ride behind them.

"It's just a race now, I guess," he said. "We know Tomosito'll be hot on our tails. And if Almagre doesn't finish Saunders' off, that poacher'll be coming too."

"Si," said Leandro. "And Almagre. He knows we will all be riding for the Lakes. He isn't one to let his enemies off easily, and he would do anything—even the inconceivable—to keep us from desecrating the old gods again."

*"Por Dios,"* sighed the girl, easing herself forward on her pinto. "I'm sorry I ever got you mixed up in this thing, Cole."

He glanced at her. Dust grimed her face and alkali had dulled the luster of her blue-black hair. Her silk shirt was dirty, her blackened leggins ripped by mesquite and Spanish bayonet. Yet, she had lost none of her magic charm.

"Don't apologize," said Cole. "I would've come whether you asked me or not."

The three of them suddenly pulled up short beneath the last twisted cedars, looking out into the valley that stretched eastward. Cole had traveled in wild country most of his life, and was used to emptiness and silence. Yet this was like nothing he had ever seen—the hush that hung over this infinite brown plain was morbid, foreboding. A band of antelope drifted across the sere grass like cloud shadows, ghostly, intangible. Leandro pointed to a chain of gleaming lakes some miles off.

"The Accursed Lakes," he said. "Once they were fresh water, and the cities about them were gay and happy. But in Quarai so the legend goes, lived an unfaithful wife, and because of her sins the lakes were doomed to be salt forever after. . . . Ti-ba-ra lies southward."

The boy seemed reluctant to leave the fringe of trees, so Cole urged his black forward into the lead. They toiled down the edge of the ghastly plain into a narrow smooth trough-like valley, skirting a huge, darkly-wooded upthrust of rock that Leandro called the Mesa de los Jumanos. Overhead, a buzzard shrieked and wheeled off.

They rode through deep sand that clutched at the horses' hoofs. Leandro's eyes flashed from side to side and he shifted nervously in the saddle.

Cole had lived with Indians enough to know what the Acoman was going through. Leandro was not one of Almagre's fanatics, but as he had said, even the Acomans who worshipped the Spaniard's Tata Dios, also worshipped the Trues. An Indian might be utterly courageous in battle, yet cowered like a child in fear of his ancient gods. It took consummate nerve for the Acoman to brave the wrath of the Trues and the *brujo* that dwelt in Ti-ba-ra.

It was late afternoon when they sighted a whale-back ridge nosing out into the plain, and at its tip, an ashen hulk that stood like the ghost of some ancient, irrevocable sentinel set on guarding the sacred soil from infamers. Somber mottes of junipers brooded 'round it, here and there a lonely cottonwood.

"That is it," said Leandro in a muted voice. "Ti-ba-ra."

He fell back until he rode a little behind Cole, hand white-knuckled on the reins, mouth drawn thin. They slowed as they neared the tumbled ruins, and Cole couldn't explain the haunting dread that ran through him. There was something unworldly about this Ti-ba-ra . . .

Suddenly, breaking the utter silence, a laugh floated up from the gray walls—a shrill, atonal cackle.

Cole's black shied and the trapper drew tight rein. Leandro's face turned ashen, and he sat his mount with fascinated eyes turned toward the city.

"Did you hear it. That is the *brujo*—the witch. He laughed at me when I was here before. He waited until I was in the pueblo, then he laughed like that. . . ."

The three of them quieted their nervous horses, sitting there while the shadows lengthened. Cole's saddle creaked mournfully with the shift of his weight as he finally kneed his black forward, drawing a gun. Warily, they approached the huddled ruins.

There were a number of houses, terraced as in Acoma, facing each other across a narrow winding street. At the end of the street was a larger building, high walls, frowning above the other houses. Cole swung down at the first ancient structure, its walls crumbling away from rotting viga poles. He had been carrying both guns, and he handed one to Leandro as the Acoman dismounted. They stood there for a long moment, Carmencita's hand tight on Cole's hard arm. Nothing flesh and blood would have ever halted the trapper like that; but the echoes of that laugh still seemed to waft through the city, holding Cole in a strange hypnosis. Finally he took a jerky step forward, then lengthened his strides down that darkening street.

Shadows engulfed him. The intense silence was a malignant, physical thing. The butt of his gun grew sticky with sweat.

A turn in the street brought him within sight of that large building at the other end. There was a gate in its towering wall, topped by a lintel with the minutely carved arabesques of an earlier century still visible. Through the gate, Cole could see a large cuniform room with only a single gigantic rafter to give evidence that it had once borne a roof.

The trapper stopped, then, raising his gun instinctively. He heard Carmencita's muffled gasp behind him. There in that roofless room, sitting on a pile of bricks and rubble, was the *brujo*.

He was as lean and brown as a rawhide whang, his black hair matted and filthy, his face a gaunt bone from which two buttons peered. He wore no shirt and his blackened leggins were frayed, the silver conchas long torn off. It took Cole a long moment to recognize Manuel Panuela—Carmencita's brother.

At sight of them he threw back his head and laughed again, then waved his arms about him, gibbering in Spanish, "It's mine, mine, all mine. My father left me and the others here to guard it, and the others, they went away. Now it's mine, all mine, mine. . . ."

Suddenly he sat down on the rubble and began to cry like a baby. The girl ran to him, kneeling down and pulling his matted head to her breast, sobbing.

Leandro stood gaping at Manuel, trying to reconcile this poor demented creature with his fearful *brujo*. Over against the wall were the bodies of three *mozos*, Apache arrows still sunk to the shaft in their blood-stained buckskins.

"Those Apaches who told me of the *brujo*—no wonder they knew," muttered Leandro.

"Ask your brother about the furs, Carmencita," said Cole gently. "I know it isn't fittin' to do it now, but we haven't much time."

The girl patted her brother's shoulders, trying to stop his crying. "Manuel, Manuel, where as the pelts?"

"All mine," sobbed the boy. "My father left me and the others here to guard them. All mine."

They tried for some time to question him, but he mumbled incoherently and began to laugh again, and they knew it was useless.

"We'll get him out of here as soon as we find the furs," Cole told the girl. "Leandro, you get up on the wall and watch for Saunders and the others."

★

LEAVING Carmencita with her brother, the trapper walked through the grass-grown tumble of rotting timbers and broken 'dobe bricks to the entrance of a corridor that led away from the large room. Opening off each side of the hallway were smaller rooms, and from them yet other rooms, turning the place into a veritable catacomb. Cole spent most of his time scanning the ground for footprints or other sign, but the untrammeled dust of centuries shrouded everything. Most of the chambers were one story, roofless, but there were a sparce few two- and three-story houses still standing.

It grew darker as he searched, and finally the moon began to rise, casting back pools of shadows into the roofless hall and sending a bright yellow gleam through the broken doorways and crumbling windows. Cole had climbed to the first terrace of a house when Leandro's frantic shout came to him, muffled and warped by the thick 'dobe walls between them.

"Señor Cole! Here they come. Saunders and his men, and behind him, Almagre!"

Cole scrambled onto a pile of fallen bricks and gained the second terrace. From there he could look west across the plain. The full moon had cast the whole valley in a golden light. Out past the groves of somber junipers that surrounded Ti-ba-ra came the first group of riders.

Cole recognized Saunders, tall and broad in his fancy saddle, and behind him, the huge Pablo Rodriguez. There were only three others. Cole didn't see how the redhaired poacher had saved even that many of his cut-throats from Almagre's arrows. But Saunders had always been a rare man, in his way.

The second bunch of horsebackers were just rounding the Mesa de los Jumanos, a mile or so behind Saunders. Cole caught the unmistakable glint of white cotton trousers in the moonlight. Almagre, then, had come, and Cimarron Saunders. The most dangerous man had yet to appear.

With thought of Tomosito, Cole felt a fear grow in him. He shouldn't have left the girl and Manuel alone back there. It wasn't like the clever Tomosito to ride in openly as Saunders was doing. The half-breed might already be inside the walls! Cole had been too intrigued by that treasure of furs and he cursed himself for it, dropping from the last terrace into the velvety shadows of the lower rooms. He stumbled through a doorway, seeking the hall. He barked his shin on a fallen viga pole and would have grunted his pain, but—that voice!

"Hurry, Rudolfo, you big *pendejo*. I heard that Acoman call from the big room. Cole must be in there now."

Tomosito!

Cole moved more slowly now, making no sound. He came into the hall finally, moving east until he reached the place where the corridor made a last turn before entering the large, cuniform chamber where he had left Carmencita.

The moon had cast the smaller rooms and the narrow corridor into deep shadow, with only vagrant shafts of pale light shining in through infrequent breaks in the wall, or through doorways. But the walls of the larger room had fallen in many places, and those breaches allowed the lunar rays to flood in, revealing everything. From where he hunched at that shadowed turn in the hall, Cole could see Tomosito and Rudolfo, crouching in the entrance to the cuniform room. Rudolfo's voice came thickly.

"*Pues,* Tomosito, it is empty. They are not here."

Not wanting to believe the man's words, Cole searched the brightly lit place with frantic eyes. It was utterly empty. The girl . . . . the girl. . . .

"*Caracoles,*" hissed Tomosito. "They were here. I saw that Acoman on the wall, heard him call to Cole. . . ."

He didn't finish. Beneath the sound of his voice, the sullen pound of hoofs had been mounting in volume in the street outside. Before either Tomosito or Rudolfo could move, Cimarron Saunders galloped right in through the door, pulling his great raking dun back on lathered haunches. Pablo Rodriguez and Tanay and the others crowded in behind him, guns drawn.

Cole saw Tomosito clutch at Rudolfo. But the big *mozo* had already freed his iron, and it was too late. The shot was a thunderous sound, echoing back from wall to wall. One of Saunders' charro-suited bandidos pitched from the saddle with a groan. The redhaired poacher was off his dun before that dead man hit the ground, throwing himself behind the pile of bricks and rotting timbers. Tanay and the others followed suit, and Rudolfo's second shot was wasted.

"That you, Cole?" shouted Saunders.

Tomosito had pulled his thick-witted *mozo* back into the shadows, and he didn't answer. Cole couldn't see the half-breed and his man now, but he could sense their soft, barely audible movements, probably shifting into one of the chambers leading off the hall.

Saunders called to his men, not bothering to lower his voice. "Those damn' Acomans are right behind us. We can't stay in here. Head for that hallway, shooting. If Cole's in there, don't let him get those hands on you. You'll die like a beaver in a jumptrap, if he does!"

The click of cocked guns came to Cole. He moved farther behind the bend in the wall. The corridor would be filled with lead in that next moment, and he knew he would meet Saunders' charge alone. Tomosito wasn't the man to stand before that rush.

But Saunders never got to charge. Through the breaches in those high walls, through the big entrance way, even over the tops of the walls came Almagre's white-pantalooned fanatics.

"C-e-e-marron," shouted Pablo Rodriguez. "Those locos are all around us. . . ."

His voice was cut off by the deadly *thwuck-thwuck* of arrows, and he rose in a jerky, spasmodic fashion from behind the pile of bricks, a dozen shafts feathering his blue dragon's coat. He tottered backward with a wailing scream.

"C-e-e-marron . . . "

Saunders and the others were already slamming out a thundering volley, drowning all other sounds. One of the white-clad Indian zealots, creeping through a breach in the wall, collapsed suddenly with a sick grunt. Two others, charging through the gate, stumbled over one another, lay writhing on the ground as lead scoured them mercilessly. Up from behind the rubbish pile rose Tanay the Apache and Cimarron Saunders, the last diehards of that once roistering cut-throat crew. Their swift, running movement toward the entrance to the corridor was synchronized perfectly. Tanay moved backward fast, facing out toward the room, sixgun roaring; Saunders faced the other way, his gun bellowing death to anyone who might have been crouched there in the hall. One of his slugs nicked 'dobe into Cole's face, and the trapper drew farther back behind the wall.

Then the two men threw themselves into the safety of the gloomy corridor, panting, cursing. It was silent again, utterly silent. Out in the cuniform room, what was left of Almagre's crowd had taken cover behind that pile of bricks lying beside the dead body of Pablo Rodrigues and the others of Saunders' men who had died there. Saunders and Tanay squatted there at the end of the hall, implacable, waiting for someone to make a fatal move or sound. And somewhere in that complex network of rooms was Tomosito and his hulking *mozo,* waiting.

Even taking them on one at a time, Cole knew he couldn't expect to come out alive. He had played Saunders and Almagre off against each other, back there at Acoma—why not here? Everyone was out there waiting for the other to give himself away. Cole chose a heavy 'dobe brick lying on the ground, hefted it, tossed

it toward the entrance to the big chamber.

It bounced off a wall, thudded against the ground. Tanay's voice was startlingly loud.

"*Dios,* what was that?"

Before he had finished, a shower of arrows filled the hall, whirring past Cole there at the turn, caroming off the sides. Saunders triggered out a shot, and somewhere in the large room an Acoman cried in pain.

"I oughta put my *saca tripas* through your gizzard," snarled the redhead to Tanay. "They know where we are now."

"*Pues,*" muttered the Apache. "I didn't—"

"Shut up," said Saunders. "Start moving back. I don't want my hide filled with arrers."

Cole heard them begin to shift toward him. The flash of gunfire would have revealed his own position, so he leathered his Remington. If they feared his hands so much, then he'd use them.

A man's softly expelled breath came to Cole. He reached out around the corner of the hall, feeling for his enemy in that pitch-black corridor. His hands closed around an Indian's smooth jaw. The man tried to pull away.

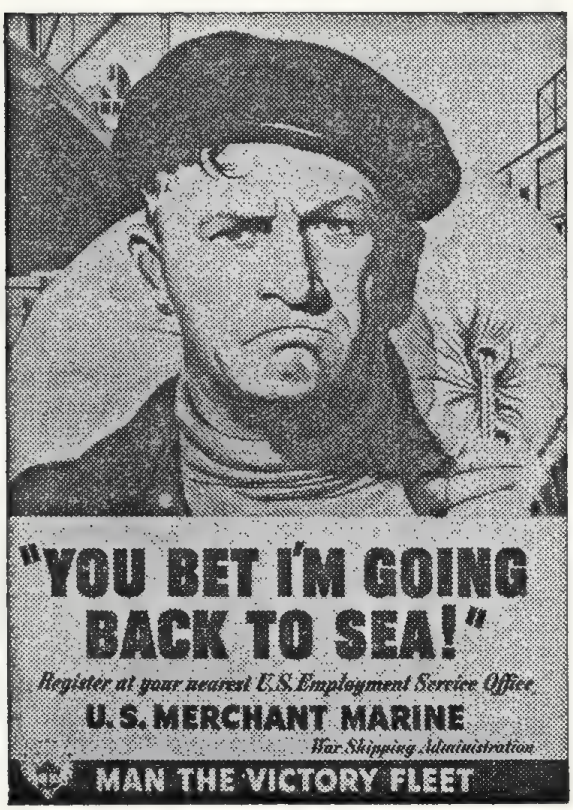
But Tanay never got his shout out, and he didn't pull away. Cole's long, trap-scarred fingers clamped shut over the Apache's mouth, and his other hand slipped around the muscular neck.

Saunders must have heard the short, sharp struggle, for his voice came through the blackness. "Tanay—"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Treasure Hunt's End

THIS time the Acomans didn't just shoot. At the sound of Saunders' voice, they rose from their cover in the big room and charged across the moonlit space into the black hall, yelling, howling, shortbows twanging. They couldn't see Saunders, but he *could* see them, silhouetted there by the moonlight. His gun bucked out one cool shot right after the other, each hitting its target with deadly precision. The first Acoman fell forward

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and slid on his face. The one behind stumbled over his body, tried to regain his balance, then went down for good with one of Saunders' bullets through him. Another crashed up against the wall and slid to the ground. One last white-clad figure leaped into the doorway, screaming:

"Abo, Ti-ba-ra, Quarai. . . ."

It was Almagre, and when Saunders shot him, he kept on screaming until his face hit the ground and death cut off his voice. Cole had already let the dead body of Tanay down to the ground. In the silence and the darkness, Saunders began backing up, muttering:

"I'm empty, Tanay, give me some of your rim-fires."

Cole kept still. The echoes of Saunders' voice died, and the poacher waited for a long, heavy moment. Then he bellowed suddenly, more in anger than fear.

"Tanay, damn you, I said gimme some shells!"

Still only silence. Cole heard the redhead steady himself with a slow, shuddering breath. Then came the sibilant sound of steel against leather. Cimarron Saunders had pulled his *saca tripas* from his belt. When he spoke again there was no trace of fear in his voice, only a terrible, mounting anger that swept all other emotion from him.

"All right, Cole, so you got the Apache. I know it's you. Nobody else could've finished him off so quiet. But then I warned him. I guess I won't get the furs now, will I? I don't care much. All I want is you, Cole. I'm coming."

He made a solid sound, pacing down toward that turn in the corridor. Cole might have used his gun. But Tomosito was still waiting somewhere, and the flash of Cole's Remington would make too good a target for the breed. So the trapper stood there behind the angle in the crumbling adobe wall, not breathing.

Neither of them actually saw the other. The sound of Saunders' steady footsteps came close to the turn, then around it. He must have sensed Cole as the trapper threw himself forward, hands outstretched, body jerking aside to avoid the knife.

Steel sliced the left side of Cole's buckskin shirt, and Saunders smashed forward against Cole's hurtling body, grunting with having missed his thrust.

They rolled to the ground, slammed against the opposite wall of the corridor, plaster flaking down on them. Saunders stabbed again, viciously. Cole let the knife dig a furrow all the way up his forearm so he could get a grip on Saunders' wrist. Then he shifted his legs and struggled over on top of Saunders.

The poacher heaved his body into an arch, trying to throw Cole off. The trapper still had his grip on Saunders' wrist, and with a terrific jerk, he twisted the man's arm beneath his arched body. Then he bellied down hard on Saunders.

The poacher collapsed beneath that driving weight, screaming as his *saca tripas* sunk deep into his own back.

Evidently Tomosito and Rudolfo had worked through the catacomb of rooms to the other end of the corridor. Before Saunders' dying scream was through, a gun began racketing from the west end of the hall, laying down a methodical barrage about Cole.

The big trapper jerked off Saunders, whirling, drawing his own weapon free. The silver-mounted handle bucked against his palm as he fired at those flashes from the west end. And he must have hit Rudolfo, for the other's shots ceased, and his voice was thick with pain.

"*Dios,* Tomosito—"

Tomosito opened fire then. He had used Rudolfo for bait, had kept his own cylinder full, knowing Cole's gun-flashes would reveal his exact position. And even as Cole was shifting, cocking his gun for another shot, one of Tomosito's bullets caught him.

He collapsed into a sitting position, back against the wall, long legs across Saunders' corpse. He sat very quietly, numbed. He moved one hand with infinite patience until it was over his belly. The buckskin shirt was sticky with blood.

He cocked his gun slowly, carefully, holding the fleshy part of his thumb over the hammer to muffle the small click. It would have been hard enough waiting in that darkness, that silence. The awful pain made it almost unbearable. It was a game of nerves, now. Whoever could sit utterly still in that terrible place the longest would win. Cole only hoped he could live long enough to get Tomosito.

Then Manuel's laughter broke out,

rising from somewhere in that 'dobe honeycomb, reaching a fearful crescendo and then falling into nothingness.

It startled Cole at first, sent a chill through him. Then he realized the meaning of that cackle. If the girl's brother were alive, then there was a chance that she, too, lived! His perpetual, twisted grin turned up a little higher. He felt more like playing this game now, in the dead city, with the corpses lying all about him, the black shadows pressing in. . . .

Perhaps Tomosito had only waited to make sure he'd killed Cole. Or maybe Tiba-ra had penetrated even his cynical armor. He began moving, down there at the other end of the hall.

Cole sat very still, holding his breath.

Slowly, surely the half-breed came forward. Once Cole almost shot, sure that a black shadow halfway down there was Tomosito. But he didn't pull the trigger, waiting to see the shadow move. And finally he realized it was only part of the wall, crumbled in on itself.

Then something shifted, something darker than the gloom.

Cole must have made some slight movement, lining up his Remington. Because even as the half-breed jerked backward, he began shooting. With lead thudding into adobe beside him, Cole's gun bucked.

Tomosito went on backward, staggering, falling flat, his body merging with the blackness. . . .

Cole tried to rise. He got to his hands and knees. Then nausea swept through him. The ground came up to meet his face, and he guessed he was fainting because he couldn't feel the gun-butt against his hand, and he couldn't even see the blackness anymore, and the taste of dirt in his mouth only lasted a moment, and then that melted away along with everything else.

BRIGHT light struck him when he came to. He was lying in the big chamber, Carmencita bending over him. Manuel sat abstractedly beside the pile of bricks and timbers, and Leandro stood behind the girl.

"I couldn't wait any longer when I heard those last shots," murmured Car-

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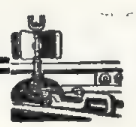

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mencita. "It was so dark, so maddening —you are bleeding all over."

"Where were you?" croaked Cole.

"Where the furs were," said Leandro calmly.

"You found them, then?"

"*Si*," answered the Acoman. "Under this pile of bricks and rubbish is a big chamber, and the furs are stored there. Señor Panuela must have dug it and heaped this stuff on top to hide the trap door. Carmencita found the edge of the door beneath a rotting timber. We were inside when everything started. First Tomosito came, and we couldn't get out, then Saunders, and finally Almagre."

The girl was cutting away Cole's buckskins with Jarales' Green River, and the trapper got a look at his wound.

"Isn't as bad as it looks, I guess," he said. "Through my side, somewhere. I was a lot messier than this when the painter finished with me. You just give me the tail end of your silk shirt to tie my belly up real tight, and I'll be able to ride. We've got all the horses we want to pack for us now. Looks like we didn't do such a bad job after all."

"It was your job," she said.

The catch in her voice made him feel for her hand, closing his big trap-scarred fingers around it. She was suddenly in his arms, crying a little, laughing.

"When I heard the shots and thought maybe they'd killed you, nothing else seemed to matter," she choked.

"Nothing else has mattered with me for a long time," he said. "Ever since I sold my first furs to your father and saw you there in the hacienda."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she said.

"I never was much of a hand with women," he grinned. "And I knew how you felt about me. What would you want with an ugly fool of a trapper when you could have any caballero in New Mexico."

"You didn't know how I felt about you at all," she said. "And what would I want with any caballero in New Mexico? There are hundreds of them, all rich, all handsome, all alike. There is only one Painter Cole, and I love him. . . !"

THE END

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RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. City 17

*(Continued from page 8)*

those days when a man was strictly on his own, and a drugstore cowboy would not have lasted up the shortest hill in the country.

P.S. If I haven't thoroughly cussed out the Johnson County murderers of '92-'93, I may decide to take another fancy shot at them later.

You're welcome to another shot, Mr. Jackson. But just remember that when you do take a shot at somebody, it's only fair to give them a chance to shoot back!

### *Pre-Pony Express*

Here's an answer to a letter printed in the October issue, in which J. G. Williamson, of Chicago, claimed that the greatest horse-racing in all time was done by the Pony Express. Lt. Oliver Poe, of Fort Bragg, dissenting:

Dear Strawboss:

. . . and it's a bunch of errant nonsense to try to argue that the so-called Pony Express outstripped any other horsemen in speed, endurance or courage in the frontier. Apparently Mr. Williamson has never heard of a man who made history on horseback some dozen years before the P. E. ever came into being. This is the famous Francois Xavier Aubrey, an independent trader of Santa Fe.

Aubrey, though he weighed but a hundred pounds and stood only five feet two, made up in daring, initiative and determination what he lacked in stature and bulk. Furthermore, he was a highly impatient man. He was impatient with the length of time it took to transport trade goods, by slow-plodding, ox-drawn wagons. Even by horseback, it took twenty to thirty days to make the trip between Santa Fe and Independence. More than one such journey a season was impossible. But Aubrey was the type of man who challenged the impossible, and he intended to make three of those trips before bad weather blocked the trail. He'd ride to Independence, stock up with trade goods and take his loaded wagons back to Santa Fe.

Three trips a year! Men laughed at him, called him mad. Nonetheless, on December 22, 1847, he started from Santa Fe with five horsemen and servants. Mexican robbers stole ten mules, but Aubrey escaped their ambush. Sixty miles before Council Groves, his servants gave out, exhausted. He went on alone, arriving at Independence on January 5, a distance of eight hundred miles in fourteen days twelve days actual running time. March sixteenth he headed back for Santa Fe with his caravan, though other traders thought it dangerously early in the season. His daring paid off, for he sold out his shipment, and left again.

He was determined, however, to beat his own record from Santa Fe, and started on May 19, arriving at Independence the twenty-eighth. traveling time, eight days, ten hours. On that trip three horses dropped from under him, as did two mules. He was three days without provisions, and had to walk for miles, and slept only four and half hours. His average—riding time only—was a hundred and fifty miles per day.

At Santa Fe he offered to bet five thousand dollars that he could cut down the time to Independence to six days. The bet was eagerly taken. He sent relays of horses ahead, and started the ninth of September, carrying with him a special extra edition of the *Santa Fe Republican.*

Down the mountain road his horse pounded, through Pecos and Las Vegas, to where his first relay awaited, seventy-four miles away. He made another change at Point of Rocks. At the next relay, he found that Indians had stolen his horse and murdered its tender. He made his way to Cimarron, a hundred and fifty miles, where he had three fresh horses stached. He mounted one and drove the other two ahead. Near the Arkansas River, the last of these three gave out. He hid his gear and started on at a trot, twenty miles, to the point now known as Aubrey's Crossing.

At Fort Mann, the trader he wanted to see was away on a buffalo hunt, and Aubrey slept for two hours—his first sleep since starting. The evening of September 17, he rode into Independence. He couldn't open his mouth to

say a word, and had to be lifted from his blood-caked saddle.

But he'd won his bet and established a horseback record that still stands to this day. He went on to Saint Louis, the entire trip from Santa Fe taking just ten days—an unprecedented race against time.

He died in Santa Fe, in 1854, when, after a thrilling career as a freighter and explorer of a new and faster route between Santa Fe and Southern California, a rival trader followed him, returned ahead of him to Santa Fe and claimed prior discovery. That led to a quarrel with his old friend, publisher of the *Santa Fe Republican,* which resulted in Aubrey's killing.

I don't know the fastest time made by the Pony Express, but I'd back Aubrey against even such figures as the famous Pony Bob Haslam any day of the week. And it certainly appears as if the technique of the Pony Express owes a long unacknowledged debt to Aubrey. I think it's high time that some one gave credit this half-pint pioneer who hailed from New Mexico!

We're glad to give credit to him, Lieutenant Poe, and to the New Mexican boys in our fighting forces who are, today, living up to the high mark of buckskin courage that Aubrey exemplified.

### *Kentucky Marksman*

From the Blue Grass State, home of the Long Rifle, comes talk about long-distance game shooting. Here's China Mitchell, of Brooks Station, Kentucky:

Dear Strawboss:

Some time ago, I read a letter in your magazine stating that the writer shot a buck at 880 yards. I can't say that he didn't, because I have no right to judge, since there are no deer where I live, but there are plenty of foxes and small game.

I can prove to anyone who writes me that I did shoot a red fox, at 856 yards. I used a Winchester, Model '94, .32 special. I hit exactly where I aimed, in the left shoulder. Also, I hit three out of five nine-inch bull's eyes, painted on a bed-sheet at nine hundred yards, using a hooded front and open rear sight.

I have been using guns of all kinds since I was ten years old and I am a gun-smith by trade. I think the '94 Winchester carbine, .32 special, is the best all-around fire-arm that is made. In fact, I have worked on every type of gun and have fired them. A .32-20 pistol doesn't have it over others; true, it has less bounce than a .45, but it also has less power. The S. A. Colt .45, in my opinion is the best revolver made in the U. S. You can shoot at the motor of a car with any other caliber and maybe hit a spark plug or gas line, but when a slug from a .45 hits it, it will stop dead and stay dead.

The German Luger is the hardest hitting gun, but it is no good. The Colt .45 with a 4¾" barrel is still the best and sweetest of them all. With one of them a friend of mine by the name of Guy Miller hit the head of the horse printed on a package of Twenty Grand cigarettes as far as we could see it. Also . . . we have hit empty huls on twigs from several yards away. If anyone wants proof of this, please write me and I will give it to them.

P. S. We are not gunmen of the Old West, but we can hold our own against all odds, whatever they are, rifle or sixgun.

Good for you, Mr. Miller! We're sorry that we can't reproduce the photograph of the fox that you sent in. And we're sure that you're helping to make it possible for other friends to shoot bigger and far more dangerous game, in both the South Pacific and in Europe.

### *Lady Hellcat!*

Ted Merrick, of South Bend, has a little anecdote and a few questions about that colorful and unforgettable frontier character, Calamity Jane:

Dear Strawboss:

I recall an old-timer acquaintance I met on a California-bound train and he told me that, to him, anyway, Calamity Jane was the greatest woman of all time. Seems this fellow, as a kid, was sort of a drifter; he was a gambler

for a while, a greenhorn tenderfoot, who would follow the boom mining towns, etc. Well, once in Goldfield, Nevada, he was broke and came down with pneumonia. He found a bunk in a vacant shack, and tried to tough it out there alone, weak, sick, and delirious. At last he fell on the floor, unconscious.

He awoke days later in the bunk. He didn't know what to make of it, because he was actually between sheets. He heard a hoarse voice tell him to open his mouth, and someone put a spoonful of gruel into it. His nurse, an old woman, went away, but came back every day until he was well.

He was surprised to learn later that his volunteer nurse was none other than the famous woman-freighter and general tough-hand, Calamity Jane Cannary. My friend luckily picked up some money after that and found out where Calamity was. He asked what he could do for her—she was at that time apparently down on her luck and not feeling too spry.

She said, "Nothing." Then he had the bad judgment to offer her money for nursing him. He got the bills thrown back in his face, propelled by some of the best plain and fancy cussing he'd ever heard in all his life.

This youngster wasn't long in catching on after that. But he saw that for a little while, Calamity didn't lack for the few comforts she wanted. This happened during the first years of this century. Could you tell me when and where Calamity died. Also, if she was actually married to the famous Marshal Wild Bill Hickok, in Deadwood?

If nobody else can answer Mr. Merrick's question, first-hand, we'll look it up. As to her much-disputed marriage with Wild Bill, we just don't know. Perhaps some one of the Branding Corral crew will be able to settle, once and for all that question.

### *Killers All!*

And Jim Stuart, of Fort Worth, has this to say:

Dear Strawboss:

History, they say, has a habit of repeating itself. When I think back just a few years to that time when it was clear to many folks that we were in for a long and bitter war, yet we weren't doing anything about it, it reminds me of the old times during the Indian troubles, when an officer, attached to Fort Dodge said, "Under no circumstances, no matter how aggravating, never, never kill an Indian first. Let them kill you. Then, and only then will it be time to retaliate."

One cannot help but remember the Japs program of murder and rapine in China, their slapping the faces and inflicting many other indignities suffered by the civilian men and women representing our government in Chinese cities before Pearl Harbor. Well, we sure let them kill us first, but now—at last—we can hit back!

That brings to mind, also, the fact that the Japs are like Indians in their tactics, in their innate cruelty and disregard for common, human decency. A bunch of freighters were waiting at Fort Dodge to take their wagons through hostile territory. There was an iron-clad military rule that no less than a hundred wagons might set out; a smaller force would have to wait until others came up. However, one small outfit got impatient, and sought the advice of a scout. This is what he said:

"One man can go through twenty time, and Injun no see. Twenty men go through one time, and Injun kill every one of twenty damn fool quick!"

I think our old Indian fighters might have done all right in jungle warfare. At any rate, my grandson, now in New Guinea, says that he can rate a place, when he comes back, right in the V.I.W! (Veterans of Indian Wars.)

Good luck to you, Mr. Stuart—and a lot of good luck to that fighting grandson, who's living up to the tradition of his family, his state, and his country!

### *Two-Gun Men*

Now let's go out to San Diego, where Sergeant J. E. Francis, U. S. M. C., pulls this one out of the hat.

Dear Strawboss:

I've been reading Westerns for a long time, about how the two-gun men used

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to knock 'em off. Me, I'm just a child trying to get along, like they say. But, brother, I've handled both the Colt .45 double-action and the automatic. One gun, when you're shooting it, is plenty to hold in your hand. I've been in China Station, in Nicaragua and knocked around a little on my own, but I can't figure any man shooting two .45's at the same time and hoping to hit anything—even if he wants to weight himself down with that much armament.

Well, Sergeant, we can't always stick to things that actually happened, because this is a fiction magazine. But we'll try to tell the editor to watch out for any character who shoots his artillery both at the same time. And we'd like to hear about gun-fanning—from anyone who really knows.

***Powder River—Let 'Er Buck!***

Now here's one that throws and ties us. Introducing Bill Burton, of New York:

Dear Strawboss:

I used to ride range back in 1902, up in Wyoming. I won't tell you the name of the outfit, because they're still in business, and I read in your Branding Corral some sort of reference to the so-called Johnson County War. Well, all I can say is that you don't know one-tenth of what really happened up there. I wasn't in Frank Canton's bunch, and I can say that there was more bloodshed done around there than any man would like to see. Strawboss while this is all gone and past, it's still alive to me. All I can say is that, even if I wasn't around there at the time, I'd always heard the highest words spoken of Nate Champion and Nick Ray. As history proves, their killing was just plain legalized murder.

I happened to own a little cow-farm, as I called it, in Idaho at that time. Well, I've been a resident of Wyoming for about forty years. For real good cow-country, you never saw any better. Beef-cattle, that is.

Time to say *hasta luego* until next month, amigos. And in the meanwhile, we'll be looking forward to hearing from you, both old-timers and pilgrims!

—STRAWBOSS

## ★ UP THE TRAIL ★

WE'VE been hearing a good deal recently about what's going to happen after the war; what kind of country we're going to have and what provisions will be made for some ten million of our fighting men after they once more see the face of the Statue of Liberty. One thing is certain; we don't want any more apple-selling on the street corners by our boys such as we had during the last of the Twenties. And—although the war may yet be far from won—we don't think it's any too late to start planning to make the change-over to peace-time economics without the heartache and the misery which heretofore, after every war, has accompanied that process. Government dole or such makeshifts as "created" jobs—which we take to mean jobs that have almost no purpose but to keep men busy—we believe are almost as unpalatable to American citizens.

The problem is, of course, far too complex to attempt to solve by any magic formula; indeed it promises to be a tough nut for the best and most practical men in the country to solve—men who have made a life-long study of economics and who do not lose sight of other allied scientific fields. But one thing is certain, and it's an important element in attacking the problem: We must face the future unafraid, eager and confident, with the full realization that we're up against still another difficult task, but one which, with perseverance and our native inventiveness and courage can and must be licked.

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armed forces, and on the part of those who are backing up our fighting men, to let no problem, no matter how complex or difficult hinder or stop our united effort for victory. We have only to recall the pictures of the flaming havoc following the sneak-attack of the Japs on Pearl Harbor, then to view the other, later pictures after more than a year later. There we may all see the miracles wrought by the United States salvage crews, in bringing back to their proud heritage the warships which seemed, after that fateful December day, to be doomed to utter and everlasting destruction.

We remember that other day when, looking from our office window late one afternoon, we saw the billowing clouds of black and yellow smoke rolling up to the sky that told of the world's largest ship, was a flaming holocaust, apparently a total loss. We recall, too, the feeling of despair that rode the men who had sailed on her, and the Navy engineers as they started their preliminary work. . . .

Yet, about a year and a half later, that queen of the seas slowly regained its position, and was floating free once more—and the biggest salvage job in the world was successfully nearing its completion. Daily men in the strange, unhuman diver's suits risked their lives to grope their way with drills and tools in the wet murk of the North River slip to bring the *La-Fayette* once more into effectual use against our enemies. And we think that the words of a Navy commander, who had been on her the night when she caught fire and sank, is well worth repeating today, because it serves to emphasize the same fine spirit of determination that will see us not only victorious in battle, but also in the struggle for re-adjustment to national peace-time basis.

"As bad as I felt when I watched her topple over that night," said this Navy officer, "I felt a corresponding degree of elation as I watched her come back again. When she went over I had the feeling that no human hands or ingenuity could stop her or ever set her right again. Now I feel that there's nothing that human beings cannot accomplish, once they set their minds to it."

We think too, of the slogan which, dur-

ing those difficult months, was in the office of the Navy captain in charge of that job; a plain framed placard that read: "Difficult things we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer."

And we recall the boasts of Hitler's when he made bold to say that the democracies were physically and psycholologically incapable of waging effective war; that they were too soft, too indolent, and the best they could do was to get there with too little and too late. Yet in all the history of the world there had never been such an armada as that which heralded our invasion of North Africa; and it was to be still further increased the night when our men first set foot upon Sicily. Perhaps by the time you read this, even those gigantic operations will be dwarfed by other, newer attacks in force at some as yet unknown part of the so-called Fortress of Europe.

We believe that it is good to think back on these things, of these seemingly impossible tasks which loomed so blackly before us, yet which we have met and conquered. In the story of human achievement perhaps nothing stands out as dramatically as the saga of the taming of our Western frontier, which each month, you find depicted in *Star Western's* fiction. There men made their determined fight against overpowering odds and struggled, fought, and often died to make their world a better place in which to live. We, too, will have another such task before us. Perhaps it lacks a little of the swift sudden surge of heady adventure which you find in these pages, but one which, nonetheless, offers its challenge to our ingenuity and courage in salvaging a war-torn world.

THE EDITORS


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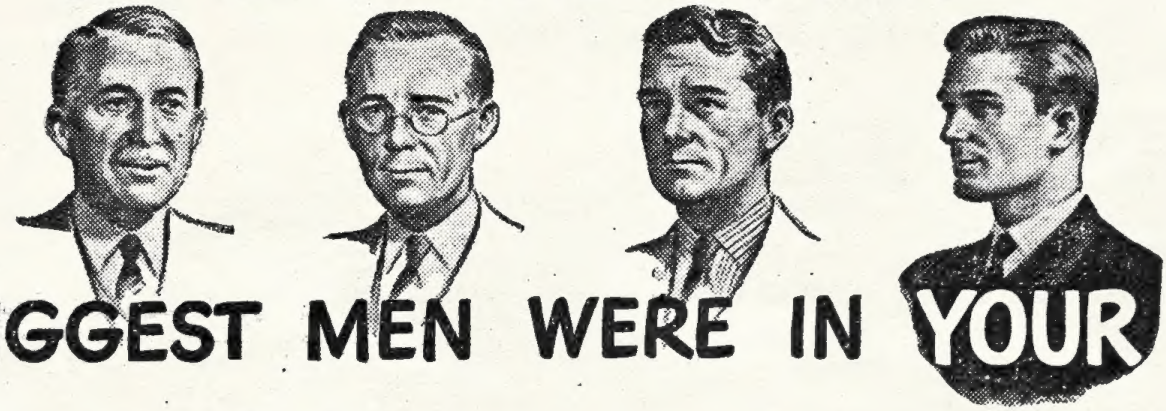

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## REEF YOUR TONGUE!

It's swell to have a lot of ships—
an' Uncle Sam has got 'em—
But just remember blabbin' lips
can send 'em to the bottom!
The Axis is deflated, an'
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If everybody puts the ban
on double-crossin' chatter!

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